

Thousands vote to strike across UC system. The action could hobble research and grading ahead of finals

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Union workers and their supporters blocked traffic during a sit-in at the intersection of Euclid and Hearst Avenues outside UC Berkeley on April 26, 2022. Thousands of University of California academic student workers — teaching assistants, post-docs and researchers — protested working conditions and wages at all 10 UC campuses.



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Nearly 50,000 University of California student workers — researchers, postdocs, teaching assistants and graders — voted overwhelmingly Wednesday to go on strike, an action that threatens to hobble UC campuses and laboratories up and down the state ahead of next month’s final exams.

The frustrated employees voted by a 98% margin — 35,654 to 904 — to strike over pay and what they called UC’s unfair labor tactics, and could walk off their jobs as early as Nov. 14. The labor action is expected to be open-ended.

“Our teaching assistants do the vast majority of the teaching work for UC, and we do basically all of the research. If these two things stop, the university can’t really function,” said Tanzil Chowdhury, a graduate student researcher at Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory who serves on one of four union committees bargaining with the public university.

Although UC's Office of the President expressed confidence that instruction and research could continue seamlessly during a strike, individual campuses acknowledged that large-scale walkouts would be tough, with classes having to be canceled if all of the union members left work. Either way, some research labs are likely to have to close for safety if there aren't enough people to staff them.

Also, if the strike occurred around finals, "it would be challenging," said UC Berkeley spokesperson Janet Gilmore. "Our undergraduates depend on our graduate students to provide feedback on their work and/or assistance understanding course material," so a disruption could be hardest on those students.

Gilmore said it was likely the campus would tap faculty to step in and support undergrads and make sure their grades are posted on time.

Compensation is a key sticking point in the labor dispute.

Chowdhury earns \$40,000 a year to run experiments on semiconducting nanomaterials, analyze data, write and give presentations and maintain lab equipment, all of which he said amounts to a full-time job of at least 40 hours a week. But his appointment letter acknowledges that he is being paid for just 20 hours a week, as are most of his coworkers across the UC system.

"Our work benefits the university in a huge way. It's critical to bringing in billions of dollars in research funding, and you can't do those things in just 20 hours," said Chowdhury, noting that he spends more than 30% of his salary on rent and utilities alone.

UC teaching assistants earn \$24,000 a year. While those jobs are half-time positions on paper, "in reality, they're working more than that," he said.

For those employees and for graduate student researchers, the union is asking for a minimum of \$54,000 a year — a figure based on the median cost of housing in the state — with future raises tied to housing costs.

UC spokesperson Ryan King said the university has offered wage increases to help employees "meet their housing needs."

“Our primary goal in these negotiations is achieving multiyear agreements that recognize these employees’ important and highly valued contributions to the university’s teaching and research mission,” King said, adding that the university is offering fair pay and good health benefits, in a “supportive and respectful work environment.”

The 48,000 mostly student employees are represented by the UAW, the United Auto Workers union, whose full name is the International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace, and Agricultural Implement Workers of America. But there are no autoworkers in the UC action.

Instead, there are four groups of academics bargaining for separate contracts with the university:

- Local 2865 includes 19,000 teaching assistants, tutors and graduate students who teach and grade papers.
- Another 17,000 student researchers don’t yet have a local number because they haven’t negotiated a contract with UC since joining the union last year. Chowdhury is on the bargaining team for this group.
- Local 5810 has two bargaining units, including 5,000 academic researchers — such as those at UCSF who study diseases — and 7,000 postdoctoral students who have been negotiating with UC for a year.

No healthcare workers are represented, and UC’s medical centers will remain open during a strike.

The UAW has filed 20 unfair labor practice claims against the university, accusing UC of unilaterally changing pay and benefits, and withholding information it was required to disclose.

Chowdhury blamed UC for one tactic he said was especially egregious, saying the university claimed it would cost \$1.4 million at UC Berkeley alone just to share pay data with the union.

“That really got under my skin,” he said.

UC's King said the union's allegations are wrong.

"Throughout the negotiations, UC has listened carefully to the union's concerns and bargained in good faith," he said. Despite these unfounded claims, UC remains committed to continuing its good faith efforts to reach agreements with UAW as quickly as possible."

Last April, hundreds of UC student employees shut down the intersection at Hearst and Euclid avenues in Berkeley for an hour as part of a statewide protest over working conditions and wages at the 10 UC campuses and university laboratories.

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