

UAW on strike: COLA in context

At this point, UC labor relations and admin must be reflecting on the flatfootedness of their strategy. Entering the second week of a system-wide strike of grad workers, postdocs, and academic researchers, the determination of the rank-and-file to stay on strike until we win is entrenched and expanding. Pickets may be sparser this week due to the impending holiday, with students and workers deserting an already quiet campus a few days earlier than usual to spend time with loved ones. This fact should serve to remind us, however, that the true efficacy of our strike is measured not by the size of rallies or the rowdiness of the picket, but by the number of workers withholding their labor over time. This is something that our bargaining team fails to understand, as it volunteers major concessions on our core demand at a moment of power.

This strategic orientation has developed over several years of organizing behind the COLA demand. We've learned that short-term strikes, even with total shutdowns, do not threaten crises at UC in the way that they might at other worksites. The steady accumulation of missed instruction hours, especially late in the quarter, along with the passage of deadlines for finals, grades, and research grants, ratchets up the pressure on the administration as the cogs of university operations jam and effects begin to accumulate in other sectors of the campus workforce. This strategy was hard won in the first place, and was set in motion by meticulous organizing since the end of the wildcats at the onset of the pandemic. We would be remiss not to have it guide our action and tactics both on the ground and at the table.

This shorter, quieter week also gives us an opportunity to reflect on the deeper meaning of the struggle. Our strike has been the subject of overwhelmingly positive national media coverage—even if these stories often, predictably, miss the point. Last week we wrote in these pages that we're not striking for higher wages, but for COLA—the demand that our compensation be determined by the cost of living in California, so that no worker spends more than 30% of their salary on rent. This, we reiterate, is much more than just a pay increase.

To grasp the significance of this demand, we can look to the history of our own union, the UAW. The tension that we can see between anxious bargaining representatives now pushing very hard to replace the COLA demand with simple

raises is continuous with the larger dynamics of the labor movement since World War II. The end of that war saw a massive strike wave across the US, widely considered the most concentrated period of labor-management strife in U.S. history. Following the wildcats in auto during the war years, a strike of 225,000 GM workers exploded in November 1945 demanding a 30% pay increase without an increase in company prices. Workers that is, demanded that their victory not be immediately eaten up by inflation. In making such a demand, they anticipated the principle of COLA—the guarantee that compensation be determined in relation to the cost of living. In our own moment, where rent can rise by more than two-thirds over the life of a contract, our COLA demand strikes at the heart of a decades-long arrangement of price and wage stability amid soaring property values, where wage increases evaporate into the rent check, even when price inflation is steady (which, today, it is not). With this demand, we are saying that working people and tenants will no longer consign increasing portions of their wage to the benefit of real estate portfolios. And no one in California has a real estate portfolio as large as the UC. In both cases, the upward drift in the cost of living is an attack on the entire working class.

In short, COLA intervenes anew in a historical process, and takes up the demand of workers before us that our salary guarantees us the ability to afford to live where we work, and to etch that principle into our contract so that this will always be the case. This is why COLA is about so much more than a raise, and so much more than our own strike. When we win, we ensure that the ability to reproduce our livelihoods will no longer be subject to the vicissitudes of the market. We set the stage for unions across the country to do the same, starting here in the UC. In the midst of a historic wave of unionization drives throughout different industries in the U.S., the potential of our movement to build this kind of worker power has potentially massive consequences.

So when we're out there on the picket line this week, be encouraged not only by the determination of your comrades, the beauty of our collectivity, and the soundness of our strategy, but in knowing also that we take up the struggle of rank-and-file workers of the past. In winning our COLA, we have the potential to help shape the trajectory of the union movement in this country for years to come.

We must cleave to our COLA demand. Share this with your bargaining team.
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