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CALIFORNIA

## Vote by UC graduate student workers to ratify labor agreement exposed a sharp divide among campuses



Pickers protest at UC Irvine in early December. (Allen J. Schaben / Los Angeles Times)

BY PALOMA ESQUIVEL | STAFF WRITER

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As University of California graduate student union leaders and supporters celebrated Saturday the ratification of a new labor agreement that ended a historic strike, the vote also exposed a sharp divide among campuses.

The agreement was approved by separate units of United Auto Workers — with SRU-UAW representing graduate student researchers and UAW 2865 representing teaching assistants, tutors and other student academic workers. Overall, about 68% of graduate student researchers voted in favor of the agreement to secure their first UC contract while about 61% of teaching assistants and other student academic workers voted to approve the agreement.

But teaching assistants and other academic workers at UC Merced, UC Santa Cruz and UC Santa Barbara overwhelmingly rejected the proposed contract while majorities at the UC system's other campuses voted to approve it.



Graduate student researchers at Santa Cruz and Merced also voted against the agreement. At UC Santa Cruz, only about 20% of workers voted in favor of the contracts. At Merced, it was about a quarter of workers.

Student workers who opposed ratification said they were working to figure out next steps in a battle they see as just getting started.

“This is a fight that’s going to continue. We’re not done,” said Mark Woodall, a UC Merced doctoral candidate in physics and chair of his UAW 2865 campus unit. “This has really invigorated people in a way who feel very disappointed in the outcome.”



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The agreements secured significant gains in wages, child-care subsidies and paid leaves and include protections against bullying and discrimination.

“These contracts are going to improve quality of life for academic workers, they’re going to make a stronger university in the long run, and they’re going to make it so that these institutions are inclusive of people who don’t come from positions of privilege,” said Emily Weintraut, a doctoral candidate in food science at UC Davis, during a news conference on Saturday.

For opponents, however, the wage gains offered under the contract were insufficient to address the burdensome housing costs that workers often have to contend with in order to live near a UC campus.

They also strongly opposed a provision in the agreement that offered higher wages to academic student employees at UC Berkeley, UC San Francisco and UCLA, compared with those at other campuses.

For example, for academic student employees, the contract will raise minimum pay from about \$23,250 to about \$34,000 for nine months of part-time work by October 2024. At UC Berkeley, UC San Francisco and UCLA, the rate is \$36,500.

Proponents saw the higher pay as an acknowledgment of the high cost of living in those communities and of the fact that the schools tend to offer higher pay to compete for top talent.

Opponents saw it as enshrining an inequitable wage system meant to benefit the university system's "prestige campuses."

"We're employees of the university and for there to be two tiers where some get more, that's not something a union should stand for," said Claudia Madrigal Johnson, a first year PhD student at UC Merced.

Union leaders said they felt the strike and the broader effort to secure a contract had resulted in a stronger union in which workers are more engaged. They said there was higher participation in the ratification vote than any previous vote.

Political divisions "are a healthy part of any democratic organization," said Michael Dean, a PhD candidate in history at UCLA and bargaining committee member. "But the fact is that we won more in this contract than any other group of unionized higher-education workers has ever won in any contract before."

He added that the union will be well positioned to keep pushing for additional improvements when it comes time to renegotiate in a couple of years.

Opponents of the agreement also said they felt well positioned to continue pushing for change. They noted that they had successfully mobilized statewide to encourage thousands of workers to vote no on the contract.

Madrigal Johnson and others said they planned to continue organizing at a campus level for improvements to wages and benefits. They also plan to make a push for changes to union leadership.

"There will be another contract negotiated in a couple of years," Woodall said. "There are elections for internal positions, campuses that have now awakened very strong movements among workers that are unhappy with their own campus leadership."

“The work that’s next is slow and grinding, but it’s something that I think workers have shown an immense interest in moving forward,” he said.

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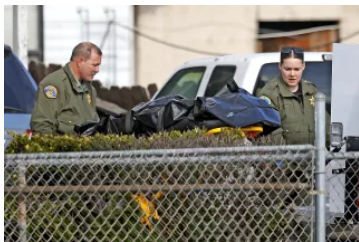
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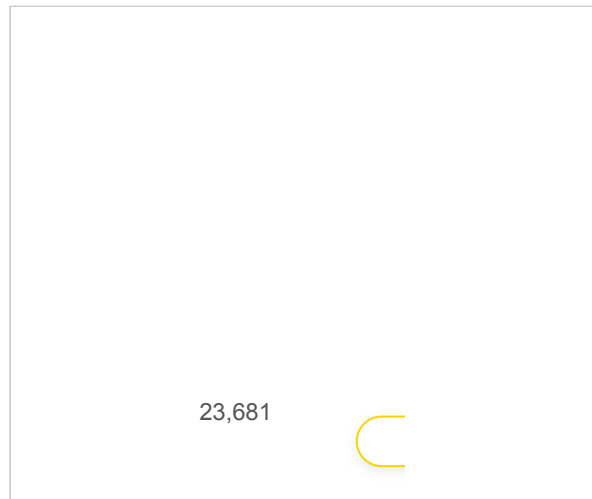
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