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Grad student unions strike controversial deal with University of California

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Striking graduate students across the University of California system, shown here at UC Irvine, are voting on a tentative agreement this week. ALLEN J. SCHABEN/LOS ANGELES TIMES VIA GETTY IMAGES

Five weeks into a strike that disrupted University of California (UC) campuses, the unions representing graduate student teaching assistants and researchers reached a tentative agreement with university administrators on 16 December. If the deal is approved by

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union members, graduate students would receive a minimum stipend of \$34,000 by October 2024—a raise of \$13,000 for some students but a far cry from the \$54,000 the union was asking for at the outset of the strike. The agreement also includes other benefits such as fee waivers, child care reimbursements for student parents, 8 weeks of family leave, and transit passes. The deal comes 1 week after postdocs and academic researchers voted to ratify the [agreement they reached with the university](#) and 5 days after a third-party mediator, Sacramento, California, Mayor Darrell Steinberg, was brought in to break the impasse between graduate student workers and the university.

The unions' 36,000 members, who will continue to strike until a deal is ratified, will have an opportunity to vote from now until Friday. More than 50% of voters must approve the agreement for it to go into effect. But it's not clear whether that will happen. "It seems like a lot of folks are leaning toward voting no," says Robin López, a Ph.D. student in environmental science at UC Berkeley.

During a press conference on 17 December, union leaders touted the deal as a historic win. "This contract will make UC so much more accessible to scholars from all backgrounds, not just to people with familial wealth," said bargaining team member Aarthi Sekar, a Ph.D. student studying genetics at UC Davis. "It sets a new standard for academic workers all across the U.S." According to a UC statement, "These agreements were the result of both sides working collaboratively to find solutions and demonstrating flexibility and a genuine willingness to compromise at the bargaining table."

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Many union members have also expressed support. "While this contract is not perfect, I think that this strike has reached a critical point and I am proud of what we've managed to do here given the monumental challenge we are up against," says Katelyn Yu, an environmental engineering Ph.D. student at UC Berkeley. "I'm especially proud of the enforceable protections against bullying and harassment," adds Zach Goldberg, a biology Ph.D. student at UC San Diego.

But others—including some members of the unions' bargaining teams—have come out against the agreement, arguing that graduate students could secure a much better deal if they continue to withhold



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their teaching and research labor. “The UC’s mediated proposals fail to deliver on the major demands of the strike,” reads [a letter signed by 21 bargaining team members representing seven of the 10 UC campuses, all of whom voted against moving forward with the tentative agreement](#). “Based on the firm commitments we observe on our campuses towards a long-haul strike, we think that there is still more to be won, and that we still have the capacity to win it.”

Many of those bargaining team members organized a Zoom call on 18 December to answer questions and mobilize a “no” vote. During the call, which had more than 450 attendees, union members shared their concerns about the financial support they are set to receive under the agreement, as well as other issues such as policies for international students and language around campus policing and accommodations for student disabilities. It’s a “horrible contract,” argued Michael Nishimura, a sociology Ph.D. student at UC Santa Barbara. “If you vote yes on the current contract, which enshrines disability discrimination, you’re voting yes on shoving your disabled colleagues out of academia,” added Heather Ringo, an English Ph.D. student at UC Davis.

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Alicia Zeng, a biophysics Ph.D. student at UC Berkeley, spoke out against the agreement’s provisions for parents while her partner—Ivan Biggs, a mechanical engineering Ph.D. student at UC Los Angeles—held their baby next to her on screen. “The current child care subsidy will be enough to cover ... less than 2 months of child care per year,” Zeng said. She and Biggs also criticized a provision regarding health insurance coverage for children of student parents, saying there are so many restrictions that few students will qualify. “This is a gender equality issue, and it has a huge impact on women’s participation in not only academia, but also industries that require an advanced degree,” Zeng said.

The organizers of the call hoped it would convince some of their peers to vote “no” this week. “This contract does not come close to our initial demands and it leaves a lot of our co-workers still rent burdened, still impoverished but also now in this weird position where they make slightly too much to qualify for certain public



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assistance programs,” said Janna Haider, a history Ph.D. student at UC Santa Barbara and one of the bargaining team members who organized the Zoom call.

But some attendees remained undecided, saying they weren't sure graduate students could sustain pressure on the university for long enough to secure further concessions. “How long do we think this long-haul strike would be?” one asked. “I do believe that we could in an imagined world win better. But I question the tenacity that some of us have.” Another wrote in the chat, “I want to vote no but am concerned about maintaining a minority strike into next quarter. My department had only 30% of workers withholding labor and 0 faculty support during finals week. ... I will do my best to organize my department but I feel like I'm only going lose more people going forward.”

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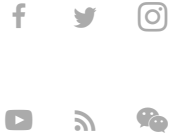
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