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UC graduate student workers ratify labor agreement, end historic strike with big wage gains



Graduate student workers on strike at UCLA, joined by faculty members. (Mel Melcon / Los Angeles Times)

BY TERESA WATANABE | STAFF WRITER

DEC. 23, 2022 6:13 PM PT



University of California graduate student workers on Friday ratified a new labor agreement with big wage gains, support for child care and new protections against bullying and harassment, ending a [historic strike](#) that upended fall term finals and has reverberated nationally.

In separate votes, two bargaining units of United Auto Workers approved the [tentative agreement reached](#) last week with the 10-campus university system — six weeks after 48,000 teaching assistants, tutors, researchers and postdoctoral scholars collectively [walked off their jobs](#) in the nation's largest strike of academic workers.

[SRU-UAW](#)'s 17,000 graduate student researchers backed the agreement with 68.4% on a vote of 10,057 to 4,640, securing their first UC contract after forming a union last year. [UAW 2865](#), which represents 19,000 teaching assistants, tutors and other student academic workers, approved the agreement with 61.6% of the votes, 11,386 to 7,097.

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“The dramatic improvements to our salaries and working conditions are the result of tens of thousands of workers striking together in unity,” Rafael Jaime, UAW 2865 president, said in a statement. “These agreements redefine what is possible in terms of how universities support their workers, who are the backbone of their research and education enterprise. They include especially significant improvements for parents and marginalized workers, and will improve the quality of life for every single academic employee at the University of California.”

UC said the new contracts would make the system’s graduate student workers “among the best supported in public higher education in the country.”

“Today’s ratification demonstrates yet again the university’s strong commitment to providing every one of our hardworking employees with competitive compensation and

benefit packages that honor their many contributions to our institution, to our community, and to the state of California,” Letitia Silas, executive director of systemwide labor relations, said in a statement.

[The UC strike](#) has drawn national attention for its massive size, breadth and prominence at one of the nation’s premier public research university systems. Some graduate students at other universities say they have closely watched UC’s unionizing actions as a potential playbook for their own organizing efforts amid a burst of labor activity across the country in recent years in higher education and at companies including [Starbucks](#) and [Amazon](#). A group of USC graduate student workers, who recently filed for their own union election, joined the picket line at UCLA — eschewing any crosstown rivalry to stand together.

For academic student employees, the new contract will raise minimum pay from about \$23,250 to about \$34,000 for nine months of part-time work by Oct. 1, 2024. The rate at UC Berkeley, UC San Francisco and UCLA would be \$36,500, an acknowledgment of the high cost of living in these cities and higher pay needed to compete for top talent.

Graduate student researchers would make a minimum of \$34,564.50 for nine months of part-time work by Oct. 1, 2024, under a new six-point salary scale. The contract will be effective until May 31, 2025.

“The rights we secured today will help ensure that victims of harassment and discrimination aren’t forced off their career paths, will make UC more family-friendly, and take important steps towards paying us what we are worth,” Tarini Hardikar, SRU bargaining team member at UC Berkeley, said in a statement. “It will help ensure that UC can support a diverse workforce, which will improve the quality of research and teaching across the system.”

The union said those gains are among [the highest ever won](#) by academic workers. They represent a 46% increase in salary scales compounded over 2023 and 2024 — compared

with 6% for the UAW's 2018 contract at UC and 9% for Harvard in 2021 and for Columbia in 2022.

Todd Emmenegger, a UCLA PhD candidate in atmospheric and oceanic sciences, said the new contract would be “life-changing” and allow him to “live with some dignity.”

Emmenegger called the contract a “historic win” for him and his colleagues. He said he had to scrape by when he first enrolled at UCLA in 2018, subsisting mostly on potatoes and peanut butter because the only housing he could find cost \$1,400 in monthly rent — three-fourths of his earnings then as a part-time teaching assistant.

The new contract will give him a 60% pay increase, from a current monthly wage of \$2,500 to \$4,000, during the nine-month academic year, and additional increases for summer research — netting him nearly \$17,000 more annually by Oct. 1, 2024. The financial cushion will enable him to visit his family in Georgia — and broaden his diet and social activities, he said.



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Janna Haider, a PhD candidate in history at UC Santa Barbara, voted no. She said the wage gains weren't sufficient to end the [rent burden](#) on so many students — the strike's central goal that fired up workers into collective action on all UC campuses and the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory. She said the wage gains were incremental, with just a \$200 increase in the first 90 days after ratification and the rest coming in 2023 and 2024.

Until then, she said, she will be strapped by rent payments of nearly 50% of her \$2,250 after-tax monthly income as a teaching assistant. With Santa Barbara housing prices

increasing by 67% since the last contract in 2018, the new gains won't fully ease the financial pain for many graduate students, she said.

Haider also opposed the UAW bargaining committee's agreement to drop demands that would have made it easier for students with disabilities to receive accommodations in the workplace and the pact's failure to push forward a call to defund UC campus police.

But Haider said she would "absolutely" abide by the ratification vote and return to work next quarter as a teaching assistant for an undergraduate course on 19th century U.S. history.

"It is disappointing and upsetting that we have enshrined systemic inequity in a union contract," Haider said. "But we will respect the results provided the ballots were counted honestly, and rank-and-file workers will continue to fight for a real cost of living adjustment, for an end to police violence, and a more just UC and UAW."

The road to ratification wasn't smooth. The systemwide work stoppage grew smaller when 12,000 strikers in [UAW 5810](#), which represents postdoctoral scholars and academic researchers, returned to work this month after ratifying [a new contract](#) that boosted their minimum pay to \$70,000 with adjustments, among the highest in the nation. Benefits also include increased support for child care and healthcare for dependents, along with transit subsidies and protection against harassment and bullying.

UC and the remaining 36,000 striking graduate student workers hit a bargaining wall earlier this month, prompting both sides to [agree to bring in an independent mediator](#). Darrell Steinberg, the Sacramento mayor and former leader of the state Senate, helped negotiate the [breakthrough tentative agreement](#) last week.

But the [proposed contract drew divided reactions](#) from the UAW bargaining committee, made up of two representatives from each campus and Lawrence Berkeley National

Laboratory.

UAW 2865 bargaining team members supported the pact 11 to 8; for SRU-UAW, the vote was 13 to 7. All representatives from UCLA, Berkeley, Davis and Irvine supported the tentative agreement; all from Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz and Merced opposed it. UC Riverside representatives from both bargaining units split their vote. For UC San Diego, three of the four representatives supported the pact; for UC San Francisco, one supported it and the other abstained. Both graduate student researchers from Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory voted yes.

Those divisions were reflected in the ratification votes. Teaching assistants and other academic workers overwhelmingly rejected the proposed contract at UC Merced, UC Santa Cruz and UC Santa Barbara while those at the other seven campuses approved it. Graduate student researchers at Merced and Santa Cruz also rejected the tentative agreement.

Opponents wanted to hold out for more, arguing that their collective power would continue to grow as campuses approached grading deadlines in the next few weeks. They launched a statewide campaign to organize opposition.



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Others, however, believed their peak power had passed, with some graduate students burning out and crossing picket lines to return to work and campuses finding ways to assess final grades without the student academic employees. They supported the agreement, opting to take the gains and press for more in the future.

While some graduate student workers made up their minds soon after seeing the terms of the tentative agreement, others took time to research the proposed contract and talk

to colleagues about it.

Ian Kinzel, a UC Riverside PhD candidate in political science, said he was initially critical that the union bargaining committee dropped the demand for a cost-of-living increase tied to housing prices.

UC Provost Michael Brown publicly said the proposal would have an [“overwhelming” financial impact](#) with a price tag of hundreds of millions of dollars, but Kinzel said he thought the union abandoned that central demand without getting a significant concession in return.

As he further researched, however, Kinzel said he came to understand that UC President Michael V. Drake did not have unlimited power to grant every demand and it would probably take lobbying the UC Board of Regents, state legislators and the UC Academic Senate to secure more gains.

In one example, he said, the demand to guarantee international students full remission of supplemental tuition throughout the entire PhD journey — which can take six or seven years — would need to be approved by regents, who control tuition levels. The contract codifies the current general practice of tuition remission for up to three years after a student reaches PhD candidacy.

“That was a big ‘aha’ moment,” said Kinzel, who specializes in labor studies. “You can’t win a war with one battle. You can take this win and move on to the next battle.”

Ultimately, Kinzel voted for ratification. He said that the wage increases were “easily the most substantial raise that I’ve gotten in any job I’ve ever had” and that they would allow him to afford medical specialists to examine a poorly healed broken ankle and molar implants that need work. He also will be able to fly to Vancouver more often to see his partner, Kinzel said.

Other contract terms include student support funds and child-care reimbursements set at \$1,350 per quarter or \$2,025 per semester, plus \$1,350 for summer. UC also agreed to enact new protections against bullying and harassment, increase paid family leave and pay 100% of dependent-child premiums for eligible student workers, including single parents whose incomes fall above the free Medi-Cal coverage threshold.

Enrique Olivares Pesante, a UCLA PhD student in English and teaching assistant, voted in favor of the agreement even though he said it fell short of everything the union wanted.

But he said organizing for it has energized student academic workers across the UC system who plan to continue building power to prepare for the next round of negotiations when the new contract expires in 2025.

“Getting this contract wasn’t the end of it,” Olivares Pesante said. “It’s just the beginning and the continuation of a very long struggle.”

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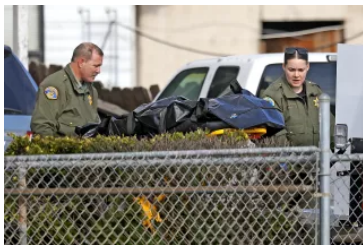


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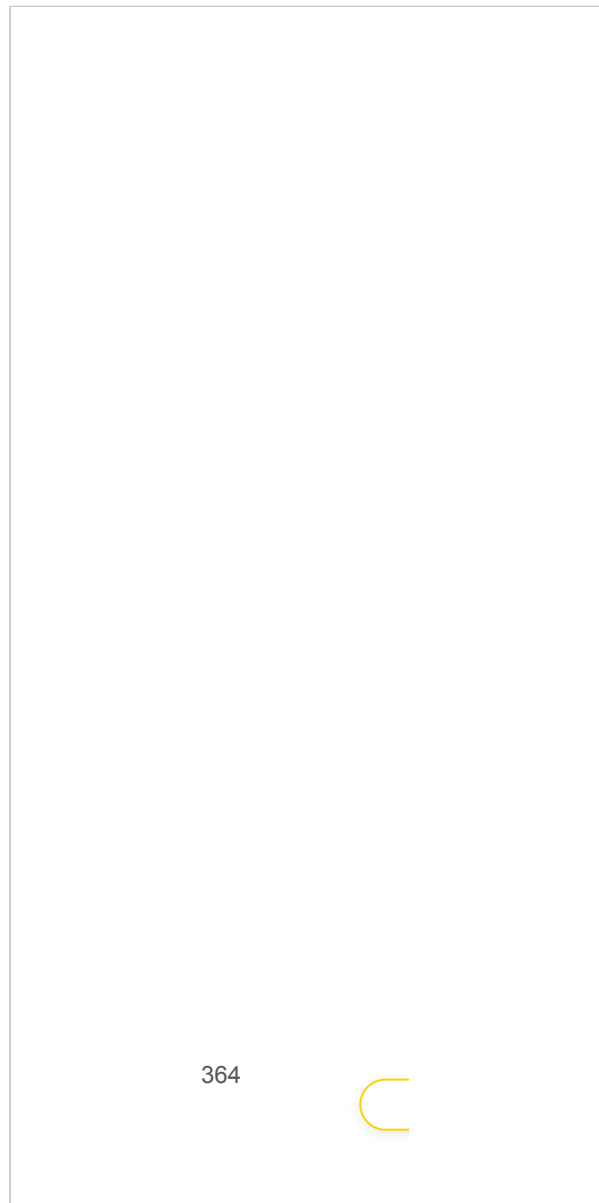
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