How ‘historic’ UC strikes could ignite a new labor movement in California

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On the first day of the University of California strikes, Jason Rabinowitz threw on his black satin Teamsters jacket and made his way to UC Berkeley’s Sproul Plaza, a brick-patterned square long known as a center of student activism and, on that morning, a gathering place for the thousands of academic workers who had just walked off their jobs.

Rabinowitz is the president of Joint Council 7, which represents 100,000 workers — all sorts, from bus drivers and construction workers to food processors and hotel employees — across Central and Northern California and Northern Nevada. None of them were on strike that day. Instead,
Rabinowitz had come as a show of solidarity — he wanted everybody to know that the Teamsters were behind the academics.

“You’re showing unparalleled strength, and I want to tell you the Teamsters have sanctioned your strike,” he said. The crowd, thick in every direction, roared in response. “The Teamsters stand with you. As long as you’re standing up, we’re standing by your side. We know that when we fight —” he pointed the mic toward the crowd.

“We win!”

“When we fight —”

“We win!”

At some other time, in some other place there might have been something surprising about the juxtaposition of a man representing the sorts of jobs we’ve come to think of as “blue collar” stirring up a bunch of striking academics, but nobody seemed to notice, not that day.

If this was one of the first showings of inter-union solidarity to come out of these actions, it was hardly the last. In the four weeks since Rabinowitz delivered his speech, carpenters laid down their hammers across the university’s campuses, UPS drives have stopped delivery of dry ice to research labs and nurses and service workers have joined the picket lines during their lunch breaks. One striker called it the biggest example of class solidarity she’s ever seen.

In the past year, efforts to unionize Amazon warehouses and Starbucks coffee shops have grabbed headlines and inspired similar efforts across the nation. But, it may be this academic strike that represents the largest shift, both in terms of union action and in the way people conceptualize the working class. Whereas “academics” may have once felt separate from the masses, hidden away in the proverbial ivory tower, that’s not the case anymore. Nelson Lichtenstein, a labor historian and professor at UC Santa Barbara, has compared the strike at the University of California to the “epic showdons with
General Motors or Ford during the mid-twentieth century” in his recent writings on the past few weeks' events. “The university is one of the great institutions of America,” he said during an interview.

The UC system, in particular, attracts students from all over the world, many of whom pay top dollar. There’s a direct link between Stanford and innovation in Silicon Valley. Then there’s the university’s research labs and medical complexes.

At the same time, the scientists who work in those labs and the teaching assistants who grade student papers — and increasingly teach the classes — argue they’re not compensated justly. For instance, the average academic student worker, the unions says, makes less than $24,000 a year, meaning they’re forced to spend more than half of their wages on rent in order to live in California’s notoriously expensive cities. (University administration argues that
this figure is distorted, given it represents pay for a 20-hour work week, so, would be double for a full-time employee.)

And so, for four weeks, more than 48,000 graduate workers, academic researchers and postdoctoral scholars, across four different bargaining units, were on strike across the nine UC campuses — as far south as the salty surf of San Diego on up to the rice and wheat fields of Davis. As a result, classes were canceled, crucial research was in limbo and professors struggled with how to administer finals and hand out grades for the semester without the help of thousands of teaching assistants.

Already, the University of California strikes have been dubbed historic — the largest strike in American higher education and the largest strike this year. Even one of the largest California has seen this decade, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The four units had initially pushed for a “joint bargaining table, essentially asking the University to negotiate with them as a whole. But the administration declined, and last week, UC negotiators managed to peel off a piece of the coalition. On Friday night, postdoctoral scholars and academic researchers, who accounted for roughly 12,000 of those on strike, overwhelmingly voted to ratify a new agreement with University administration. This was despite a fierce push from some corners urging members to reject the proposal in solidarity with the other bargaining units.

Postdoctoral scholars, who have been in contract negotiations for more than a year, will see a significant bump in pay next year — 20% — though raises in subsequent years will be limited to 3.5%. Academic researchers will also receive an increase in their pay and benefits.

However, ratifying this agreement also means these two units can no longer strike with the other 36,000 academic workers. Meanwhile, the negotiators for those workers announced last week that they would proceed with private mediation in an attempt to resolve the strike.
University of California student workers on strike protest at the Office of the President of the University of California in Oakland on Dec. 5.
Jungho Kim, Freelance / Special to The Chronicle

Generally speaking, the university has more flexibility in negotiating the postdoctoral and academic researcher contract because many researches are primarily paid through government grants and other funding streams. When it comes to teaching assistants, however, their salaries come directly from the University budget. This is true, too, for most professor salaries, which is why institutions of higher education, both public and private, have slowly shifted to a model that relies on graduate students and low-paid lecturers, hired on temporary contracts, to teach a wide variety of courses. It may explain, in part, why there’s been overwhelming support for the strikers across the University’s campuses, including from faculty, according to professors and strikers alike.

“The system is broken, now is the time to fix it,” the Berkeley Faculty Association wrote in a note of solidarity during the strike’s earliest days. “This strike across the UC system makes visible the structural crisis at the heart of the higher education in the state and the nation.”
Whatever the outcome, these strikes may end up being a pivotal moment in labor organizing history, according to people on the front lines and academics who study the topic. For the first time in their lives, tens of thousands of people are experiencing what it means to be in a union, to strike and to be in solidarity with others — with a greater working class.

“This is definitely a life-changing experience,” says Jade Moore, a postdoctoral fellow in UCSF’s radiation oncology department. “Most of what I knew about unions, I related to people who were factory workers or who worked on docks. Otherwise I didn’t think about unions.”

That was before she became a unit chair and part of the bargaining team for UAW Local 5810 — before she paused her research into cancer treatments to balance taking care of a newborn and fighting for better pay and benefits. “Even if I’m not part of a union going forward, it would still be really important to rally people together and fight for a change.”

Moore said she had a “heavy heart” about the postdoctoral strike ending: “The idea was that we would be able to make progress together.” She noted that the postdocs and academic researchers had pushed the vote out for a couple weeks to allow members to keep standing in solidarity. And, she said, Monday morning, that she was putting together a list of ways for the groups to support the academic workers who are still on strike, including going to rallies and not picking up struck work.
Majken Horton stands with hundreds of UC graduate workers and supporters as they carry on a strike to decry UC’s treatment toward students and employees, in Sacramento, Calif., on Dec. 5. Brontë Wittppenn / The Chronicle

Even with part of the coalition back at work, the energy of the past four weeks has been undeniable. Rabinowitz said the crowd that greeted him at UC Berkeley was the biggest he’s ever seen. “And it’s being duplicated all around the state.”

Small, guerilla marching bands walk alongside picket lines at UCSF in Mission Bay, making up for their lack of practice with their enthusiasm. Last week, 17 academic workers were arrested while protesting at the University of California administrative office in Sacramento. At UCLA, a makeshift strike kitchen has formed in a central plaza. Every afternoon, strikers gather there for a rally. Professor Tobias Higbie, a labor historian, can see it from his office in Bunche Hall.

Higbie can imagine the strike having an impact well beyond whatever concessions the unions are able to extract from the university’s administration.
“I think, probably, the big change happens at the micro level, where, yes, there’s 48,000 people on strike, but there’s like 150,000 people on a daily basis, engaging in this, you know, having this impacting their lives,” Higbie says. “It’s a giant educational experience. That’s true on a society-wide level. People are seeing a strike for the first time in a long time.”

As Lichtenstein, UC Santa Barbara labor historian, put it, “almost everybody remembers the first time they were on a picket line … it helps create a world of expression and creativity, a concept of liberation … (that) lasts for decades.”

Or lifetimes.

There’s a chance, too, that the solidarity on display might lead to a wider understanding of what it means to be working class. “Whenever the media talks about workers, it’s always about J.D. Vance,” Higbie says, a reference to the senator-elect from Ohio who grew to fame on the basis of his memoir “Hillbilly Elegy.” “It’s always about coal miners.”

What’s happening in California tells a different story. There are truck drivers showing up for cancer researchers outside some of the nation’s most prestigious centers of higher education. Maybe 50 years ago, union workers would have thought of the graduate students as “just a bunch of kids,” Lichtenstein says. But that’s not the case in 2022, when the total number of academic workers represented by the UAW — 60,000 across the country — is more than the total number of coal miners working in the United States — about 38,000, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

There’s a growing recognition across the country that university workers could be a powerful coalition moving forward. “For me, it’s the next generation of labor,” says Apollo Wallace, a former UPS truck driver and now an organizer for Local 2785, a union of package drivers. Wallace has been out on the picket lines at UCSF and he’s helped organize UPS drivebys. The brown trucks roll through, one after another, honking their horns in unison. The crowds go wild for it.
“There’s a ruling class, and there’s the working class,” Wallace says. “I will do everything in my strength to always support the working class, whether they’re nurses or these kids are all post grad, highly educated people, but they’re in a union and they’re proud.”

“It has been some of the most class solidarity I’ve seen in forever,” says Maura McDonagh, a graduate student researcher and part-time campaign organizer for the Student Researcher Union. Even now, with postdoctoral scholars and academic researchers having ratified their contracts, she's feeling good about the coalition they built.

“We’re not fighting one another,” McDonagh says. “And I’ll say, if and when the Teamsters go on strike, I’m going to be one of the first people out there picketing alongside them because they have incredible solidarity with us.” That time may come sooner rather than later. On Aug. 1, the Teamsters contract with UPS will officially expire. Many are betting on another historic strike.