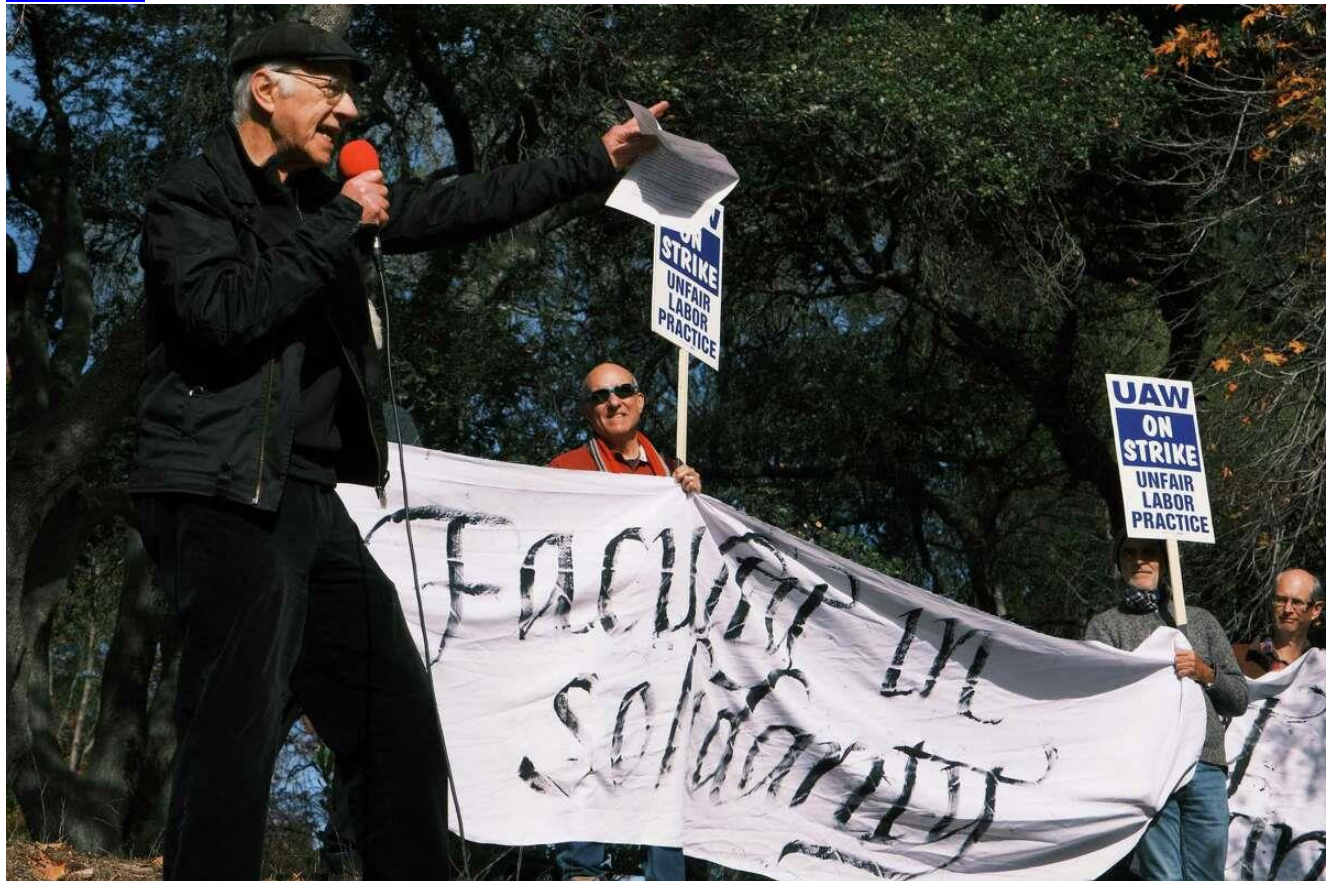


# UC faculty divided over graduate student strike and its future impact

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UC Berkeley Professor Michael Burawoy joins striking student instructors and researchers on the picket line on Nov. 21, though faculty are not on strike. The strikers are among 48,000 UC workers who walked off the job Nov. 14 to demand higher pay and benefits in the largest academic strike in U.S. history.

Ian Castro

UC Berkeley Professor Michael Burawoy teaches an introductory sociology class for 300 undergraduates with help from no fewer than seven graduate student instructors, or GSIs.

But all have been absent [since Nov. 14](#), striking for better wages and benefits alongside 48,000 other University of California student workers, postdocs and staff researchers in the largest academic walkout in U.S. history. Thousands of undergraduate papers and exams remain ungraded or unassigned. Gone are the classes and discussion groups taught by graduate student

instructors. And the heavy lifting of academia that is the historic burden of GSIs everywhere remains unlifted at UC, through empty campus halls up and down the state.

Burawoy doesn't mind.

Instead of being ticked off at the strikers who have left him with a mess on his hands, he has joined them, not only on the picket line, but in thorough solidarity.

"I've stopped teaching," said the gray-haired professor with a soft British accent. He has canceled the last of four take-home exams and told his undergrads that none of their papers will be graded until the strike is over — whether by Dec. 31, the extended deadline that UC Berkeley has granted its burdened professors, or well beyond that.

"Unless the UAW (United Auto Workers union representing the strikers) tells me otherwise, I will not do the work of the GSIs," Burawoy said, echoing the sentiment of hundreds of professors system-wide who are signing petitions and walking picket lines in support of their graduate students and other striking workers.



Demonstrators march with signs around California Hall as they protest the contract of UC Berkeley postdoctoral candidates, researchers and graduate student instructors on Friday, Dec. 2, 2022.

Lea Suzuki / The Chronicle

Still, UC has more than 14,000 professors. Most have not signed those petitions and can still be found at the whiteboard before note-taking undergraduates, although at UC Berkeley, at least, a reporter's midafternoon walk through campus the other day found few such people.

An untold number of professors have taken their classes online, although many of them recognize the muddled ethics of doing so if their intention really is to back the strikers.

“It’s a gray area,” said Alan Hammond, a UC Berkeley math and statistics professor who strode unabashedly across campus Wednesday past sign-carrying strikers. Hammond had invited a Stanford professor to give a seminar on campus and expected his graduate students to attend because, besides being workers, they must still earn their degrees.

So when one of those students emailed him to ask if the event could be made virtual so she wouldn’t have to cross the picket line, Hammond asked what difference that would make. Did she not think there was such a thing as a “virtual picket line?”

As to his own feelings about the strike, Hammond shrugged. “I understand the concept of solidarity, but I have other responsibilities, too.”

That’s a key message included in the strike guidance provided for professors by UC’s Academic Senate, the system-wide governing body to which faculty belong.

To the professors who simply want to know, “How am I expected to do this?” the guidance — from Senate Chair Susan Cochran, an epidemiology professor at UCLA, and Vice Chair James Steintrager, an English professor at UC Irvine — acknowledges that because of the strike, “some students will not have had the full experience of a class.”

But professors can still evaluate students’ academic progress and assign grades fairly, they wrote. Yet professors should be careful about simply canceling finals, which are coming up this month. Doing that “may deprive a student of the chance to raise their grade,” write Cochran and Steintrager. Making exams optional might not, they note.

Where the advice gets more complicated is when professors need to navigate their graduate instructors’ dual roles as students and employees. That’s the case for [19,000 striking GSIs and other student workers](#) who are paid to grade, lecture, teach labs and host small-group discussions.

Some faculty members, including Ron Cohen, a chemistry professor at UC Berkeley, are concerned that in the wake of the strike, labor laws will increasingly taint the relationship between mentor and protege that characterizes the professor-student alliance.

For example, Cohen said, if a professor expresses less than full support for the strike and later evaluates a graduate student negatively — even after the walkout is over — “it would have the appearance of retaliation for striking.” And if that negative performance evaluation relates to work the student had to do as a condition of employment, the student and the union could file an unfair labor practice charge.

“As a result, only faculty who most strongly support the strike are speaking out, giving a distorted view of the sentiment on campus,” Cohen said.



Cochran and Steintrager agree. In their guidance, they say that professors shouldn't hesitate to talk with students about their academic progress, but "clearly, one wants to do so while simultaneously respecting the student employee's right to strike."

They acknowledge that "a student might express concerns about this conversation to the union as a possible unfair labor practice." But they advise: Just carry on. Don't overthink it. Seek help with the labor relations teams at UC and the union if necessary.

Still, the increasing emphasis on students as employees "is disappointing and demoralizing," Cohen said. "I didn't become a professor to be a supervisor to laborers."

For now, as Cohen noted, the faculty voices sounding loudest across the strike zone are those of its supporters.

One of several pro-strike petitions is the ["UC Faculty Pledge of Solidarity,"](#) signed by 332 professors from across all 10 UC campuses. It urges faculty to stop teaching, grading and advising in person and virtually; submit no grades until the strike is over; refuse to take on the strikers' work; and withhold all other work that professors usually do.

A survey by the Council of UC Faculty Associations estimates that faculty will withhold 24,000 grades across this system this month.

How long the labor action will last is unclear. About 12,000 striking workers — postdoctoral students and academic researchers — will vote over five days next week on whether to ratify [tentative agreements](#) reached Tuesday between UC and the UAW. Voting concludes Friday. The remaining strikers, including the GSIs and 17,000 student researchers, are still negotiating.

On Thursday, in an effort to push the university in the third week of the walkout, [hundreds of strikers occupied UC Berkeley's administrative headquarters,](#) disrupted a meeting of undergraduates and administrators, and held sit-ins in buildings across campus as part of several planned actions up and down the state. Strikers occupied the administration building overnight.

On Friday, strikers at UCSF staged sit-ins at Rutter Hall and Genentech Hall, lining multiple floors of the building and hanging a large banner. They also held rallies at UC Davis, UC Riverside and outside the UC system's human resources headquarters in Oakland.



Olive Eilbott, graduate student researcher, walks with fist raised after leaving California Hall with other protesters as they march toward Sproul Plaza on Dec. 2, 2022 in Berkeley.

Lea Suzuki / The Chronicle

The Berkeley Faculty Association, a progressive organization of professors, recently [posted an essay](#) called “Why we should all be grateful that the graduate students at UC are striking.”

Burawoy, the sociology professor who is withholding his instructional work, is a former co-chair of the Berkeley Faculty Association.

The Academic Senate guidance warns professors like Burawoy that they have a right to withhold their work, but UC has the right to withhold their pay.

Ryan King, a UC spokesperson, told The Chronicle that faculty who stop work “could be in violation of the Faculty Code of Conduct.”

Burawoy understands that he and others risk being sanctioned. But he doesn’t think anyone will report rule-breakers for discipline, or that UC “has the capacity to monitor what we do.”

And so, in an email to his 300 undergrads, he admitted, “I have violated my formal obligations to you as students. I have [disrupted your formal education](#). Nonetheless, I think it is in aid of a true ‘higher’ education.”

He said he would have liked the class to continue studying the sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois to have learned about his views on modern capitalism and “how it survives on the backs of a widening working class.”

Instead, he said, in tribute to Du Bois, “Those who wish can assemble with me on the picket line,” from 2 to 3 p.m. on Tuesday, at the corner of Bancroft Way and College Avenue in Berkeley, and “join their fight for a living wage.”