

WORKERS CONTINUE TO FOOT THE BILL FOR THE UC'S UTILITIES

The bargaining meeting with UCOP on January 28 illuminated some important elements for rank and file organizing. The proposal to allocate \$100 per month for utilities, retroactive to the beginning of the pandemic, was not so much met with hostility as indifference, the primary mode of social intercourse for professional administrators. UCOP's response was suggestive: because graduate workers are "saving" money on things like transportation, they told us, the ultimate cost of utilities is negligible. In fact, they argued, we may even be netting more money off of the new deal. How they could have possibly quantified this in their ten-minute recess, after we had presented data from a survey of over 600 workers, was not a subject of discussion.

While the pompousness of their indifference was not new to many of us, it was met with understandable rage by our comrades in the bargaining session, who had presented genuine and urgent concerns only to have them dismissed out of hand by highly paid administrative lawyers — the same mercenaries who negotiate the concessionary contracts we're used to receiving every four years. Had this meeting not taken place over Zoom, it is conceivable that these lawyers would have been booted off the premises.

Underlying this absurd explanation was something more sinister, mentioned as an aside. The university has also taken a hit, did we not know? It is furloughing whoever it can: time for all non-administrators to tighten their belts! Recognizing that the pandemic has altered the balance of forces within the university as a whole, the UC is all too eager to perversely invert the gains of the COLA movement by passing off its operational costs wherever it is no longer inclined to meet them. In reality, to deny us our utilities stipend is to affirm a status quo in which it is workers who provide monthly subsidies for the UC's operations budget every time we pay our PG&E and Comcast bills.

With AFT lecturers out of contract, and with postdocs from UAW 5810 watching on at our bargaining, the UC lawyers have a simple brief: make no concessions to the graduate workers, academic staff, or others in the mostly non-tenured ranks of its labor pool. This is, of course, always their first position. But the administration certainly understands the wider stakes of the utilities campaign. This struggle over our utility bills links our campaign with the plight of exploited remote workers more generally, who have witnessed their working conditions transformed, marked by isolation and overwork. Academic workers in particular, many of whom in the U.S. continue to work in-person, are sacrificing their health for the revenue streams of the contemporary university. The hazardous situation of these "in-person" academic workers then becomes a scary bedtime story told to the rest of us. Remote workers are sandwiched between the threat of a return to in-person instruction and constant reminders of our cushy work-from-home "privileges," reminders coming from an administrative class that performs no work, remote or otherwise. These people will feast on our docility and laugh all the way to the bank.

This utilities campaign is simultaneously a struggle over the meaning of the COLA movement of the past year and what COLA will come to symbolize for the UC's organized academic labor in the fight ahead. Was it only the first wave of a broader political assertion by undergraduates, graduate students, and lecturers — the management of which is above the paygrade of even UC's suite of lawyers? Or was it an isolated spasm, with only the faintest aftershocks in a new normal fully subsumed by the pandemic? Both are possible; neither is certain. These are the kinds of dynamics that make even modest campaigns like winning a utilities stipend a more difficult prospect, but also politically significant well beyond their material value. As far as we can assess, there is no better place to concentrate our organizing efforts ahead of an unavoidable confrontation with the administration and their lawyers: the expiration of our contract in 2022.

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