

USA: Organizing from below: Chinese international student workers and the UC Strike

Saturday 11 February 2023, by [JN](#), [Li Promise](#), [YIWEN Huang](#), [ZHANG Yueran](#), [ZHOU Paula](#) (Date first published: 31 January 2023).

A rank-and-file interview about race, class, and labor organizing in US higher education

Editor's note: The six-week-long strike across the University of California (UC) campuses last year marked the largest industrial action in higher education in US history. This strike also saw the participation of many Chinese international student workers, a population that is stereotypically seen as apolitical and detached from US issues. Like their domestic and other international peers, many engaged in independent political organizing for the first time, and expressed a diversity of attitudes toward the controversial contract and how the strike was organized.

This interview is intended to spotlight the analysis and organizing work of three rank-and-file Chinese international student worker organizers, “**Paula Zhou**” (pseudonym) from UC San Diego (UCSD), **Zhang Yueran** from UC Berkeley, and **Huang Yiwen** from UC Irvine (UCI), for their perspectives on the strike. We document these voices not only to add to other important historical records of this monumental instance in the US labor movement, but also to explore the successes and challenges of building left-wing and independent mass movements among Chinese diaspora communities. We address questions that pertain to labor organizing and international student concerns in general including: How can broader movements better account for Chinese international student workers' specific concerns and positionalities, and the material and cultural conditions that shape their political experiences? What lessons can striking Chinese student workers bring back to other diaspora movements, and even struggles back home?

Lausan editors JN Chien and Promise Li, who are rank-and-file members of [Graduate Student Worker Organizing Committee at USC](#) (GSWOC-USC) and [Princeton Graduate Students United](#) (PGSU) respectively, conducted this interview.

Lausan Collective: What were some of the major concerns shared by Chinese international student workers before and during the UC Strike?

Paula: In general, inadequate wages and [nonresident supplemental tuition \(NRST\) fees](#) are major concerns for international student workers. Many do not receive income over the summer, and the university only covers in-state tuition, leaving Chinese international student workers with around \$5000 worth of NRST fees that we have to pay per quarter (amounting to \$15,000 a year). Some departments cover this fee for their students, but I know some students in STEM and other departments who had to pay for all of it. Also, I've heard from many in STEM that more protections against advisor bullying and sexual harassment are needed.

At the beginning of the strike, we had robust demands. We wanted the NRST waived, and a large pay increase. The union was originally asking for \$54,000 a year for student workers, which would

mean \$43,000 for nine-month employment. Many students wrote to the bargaining team to discourage them from further lowering the demand, but it ended up compromising on \$43,000 a year (\$32,000 on nine-month employment). By the end, the university did not accept any of these proposals and only offered a 7.5% raise (\$25,000 a year; and approximately \$29,000 a year by October 2023). Some are calling this an amazing historic raise. The demand to waive NRST was totally rolled back, as the bargaining team merely codified current NRST practices in the new contract.

Yiwen: Most of the concerns, such as cost of living adjustment (COLA), healthcare, childcare, appointment guarantee, class size, and so on., are shared by both international and domestic student workers. There are various issues specific to international students. The most discussed one is NRST remission (see [here](#) for a letter I drafted for more info). Other issues include TOEFL test payment remission and pay delay. (see “International Student Issues” in [this document](#) collectively drafted by UCI Political Science folks prior to the strike).

LC: What do you think the role of (Chinese) international student workers is within US academia?

Yiwen: Working-class Chinese international student workers within US academia share labor conditions with other immigrant workers. The university’s primary role is to consistently produce a labor force that fulfills market demands. This underlying logic frames American academia (and arguably most higher education systems in modern states) as part of how the capitalist system reproduces itself. Because the crisis-generating machine that we call capitalism operates through minimizing reproductive cost and maximizing profit, it has fed on the colonial logic of extracting cheap or free resources from the global South to the global North, while transferring the cost of the crises in the reverse direction. As such, there are at least three ways in which international academic workers from working-class backgrounds are turned into “the South of the North” in the US.

Firstly, the lack of formal support for international undergraduate students is often compensated by informal self-management through which international graduate students are expected to devote extra time and energy to their undergraduate counterparts. As a common strategy to address the financial crisis faced by most universities nowadays, Western higher education has integrated more and more international students into its system.

Even though we pay significantly higher tuition than domestic students, international undergraduate students usually receive extremely limited institutional support. This creates a class of “cash cows” that has lower chances of academic success by design. As such, undergraduate students struggling with coursework often prefer to seek out guidance from international teaching assistants who understand the problems they face. Unfortunately, this adds more emotional and intellectual labor to international graduate students’ existing workload.

The second point is the symbolic status of international student workers within the US academic labor market and the logic behind xenophobic policies like NRST. With the NRST situation in mind, especially as some union staffers claim that NRST remission was never on the table due to [strong political pressure](#) from state legislators to slow down the enrollment of non-Californian students, it is important to understand the University of California colleges as economic institutions if we want to know why international student workers are expected to pay to work by state politicians and university administrators alike.

Since the late twentieth century, PhD programs in the US have witnessed two correlated changes: the increasing precariousness of academic jobs and the rapid inclusion of people of color and international scholars. In particular, Chinese international graduate students have exponentially

increased in the past three decades. Without the collective memory of relative job security in the past, this generation of Chinese graduate workers tends to normalize the financial insecurity and hyper-competitiveness of the job market. But more importantly, there is an institutional culture of racialized “model workers” within US academia, often performed by Asian scholars.

Finally, on a more optimistic note, I would argue that Chinese international students are in a unique position to create communities of solidarity not only with each other, but also with other international academic workers from around the world. This situated precariousness in academia has generated a new wave of political consciousness among Chinese international students, leading to the formation of a plethora of scholar-activist groups such as the [Chinese Students and Activists Network](#), [Tying Knots \(千千\)](#), [The Cao Collective \(曹曹\)](#), and more.

During the UC strike this year, for example, Chinese international students created a UC statewide organizing group that connected striking students from all ten campuses. This group is crucial in shaping discourses, sharing information, educating international workers, and organizing rank-and-file dissent during the strike. On the other hand, scholar-activists embedded in these networks and communities have built solidarity with social movements across different milieus.

To voice our dissent against the union leadership’s undemocratic practices throughout the bargaining process, eight other international student workers from across UC campuses and I co-organized the “[We Are Here: UC International & Undocumented Student Workers’ Forum](#)” that addressed the multiple forms of precariousness within the UC by connecting with other non-US-citizens, disability justice groups, indigenous peoples, and workers with dependents. These communities within US academia will hopefully not only help international workers survive, but also carve out space to build a workers’ movement from below against the neoliberal university.

LC: Do you know which way Chinese international students predominantly ended up voting on the contract? If there were clear trends, why do you think that was the case?

Yiwen: I don’t have the data for Chinese international students’ voting preferences, but for reference, student workers from UC Santa Barbara conducted [a statewide survey](#) in the fourth week of the strike with a noticeable amount of international student participants. From my personal observation, there is a silent majority within the Chinese international student worker community that outnumbered the vocal participants in the strike who are primarily against the contract. With this in mind, we don’t know what the majority voted for.

The number of actively-organizing Chinese international students actively organizing and participating was already unprecedented, but we still have a long way to go to mobilize a majority of these students. It is obviously hard to generalize, but three factors contributed to the split. First, despite being the majority of international workers across UC campuses, Chinese graduate students are usually not the most politically active. This could be a result of social segregation, language barrier, cultural differences, busy schedules, and so on. This means that joining rallies, attending union meetings, strategizing with other members, and demanding union transparency and democracy, are either outside of their comfort zone or not a top priority for many of them.

Second, an overwhelmingly large number of Chinese international students are in STEM or adjacent departments. Organizing STEM workers has been a strategic difficulty and battleground for UAW 2865 in particular, and academic worker unions in general. When it comes to Chinese STEM workers specifically, there is a lack of informational infrastructure to effectively reach them. Due to the nature of their work, striking usually means more personal academic progress would be delayed than their colleagues in social sciences and humanities (who are mostly teaching assistants).

On top of this, historically, universities and union bureaucrats have been capitalizing on the disciplinary differences between STEM and the social sciences/humanities to divide and rule their workforces. As such, the question is, how do we reach as many STEM colleagues as possible and persuade them to prepare for a long-haul strike and win more? The UC Statewide Chinese Worker Organizing Group has tried various ways to do so, such as translating strike information into Chinese, creating campus-based strategy groups on WeChat, co-editing [FAQ documents](#), and circulating a [STEM work stoppage pledge](#).

Third, I want to highlight the specific ways in which identity politics was weaponized during the UAW 2865 staffcore's [1] polarization campaign, especially toward the end of our strike. In [a letter to the LA Times](#) I documented the full story of membership dissent against the UAW Executive Board's undemocratic practices, among which were the weaponization and tokenism of identity politics. Typical tactics used by the conservative caucus (or the "admin caucus") in UAW include using marginalized identities of certain bargaining team members (e.g. international students, workers with access needs, transgender members) to justify concessions during the bargaining process that actually harm these identity groups.

Yueran: Even though we do not have precise data to show exactly how Chinese student workers voted, there are several indicators speaking to how Chinese strikers voted at Berkeley. Not only was the sentiment expressed in the WeChat discussion group overwhelmingly negative towards the contracts, but all the Chinese organizers active throughout the strike ended up organizing for the "no" vote. Several STEM organizers reported that in their departments, which overwhelmingly voted "yes", the Chinese student workers they organized were the biggest voting bloc for the "no" vote. And in some of these departments, the Chinese organizers were among the few—if not the lone—organizers openly organizing for the "no" campaign. None of this is conclusive evidence, but it does seem the no vote was particularly momentous among Chinese strikers at Berkeley.

I think this was primarily because Chinese student workers here had been organizing for quite a while before the strike. Berkeley was one of the few campuses where a network of organizers as well as a culture of organizing had been growing for several years among Chinese workers. When I first started organizing in 2018, I was overwhelmed by the degree of apathy expressed by most Chinese workers I talked to (and such apathy was largely due to the factors Yiwen pointed out). However, as challenging as this organizing was, a small number of Chinese organizers gradually emerged over the years. These organizers were organically embedded in their respective departments (in particular, physics and math), who therefore could get their fellow Chinese co-workers organized and help identify and develop more Chinese organizers in adjacent departments. [2]

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That there was a small and pre-existing but solid network of Chinese organizers meant that, during the strike, we could plug in other Chinese workers who were newly energized to do more organizing, and that we could get timely assessments of Chinese workers' sentiment across a decent number of departments. This positioned us well for promoting the strategy of a long-haul, sustainable strike and finally organizing for voting no. Remarkably, this team of Chinese organizers at Berkeley had a STEM majority almost from the very beginning.

LC: A large portion of US higher education now relies on the tuition dollars of unfunded international students, who pay exorbitant non-resident fees, as a core part of their operational budgets. Did the stereotype of the "rich Chinese international student" affect organizing at all in your experience?

Paula: I don't know how outsiders see us, but even amongst Chinese students ourselves there are people who feel entitled because of their financially comfortable situation and they didn't want to participate in the strike. They just wanted to vote yes. Some of them even came to us and said look at the raise in 2024, it's pretty big—why can't you be happy? To them it's nothing, but I have to explain over and over again that it's for the most vulnerable, the least paid, and those without family support—that's why we're voting no. They can't survive until 2024 with our current poverty wages.

Chinese students have become more polarized at UCSD. Even if you're not very rich, if you're able to come here, then you enjoy certain privileges back in China. Some are very empathetic to others' struggles while others are self-centered about their own interests with a Social Darwinist mindset: If you don't have a good life, then it's because you're not capable or because you're not adapting yourself to this oppressive system. In my view, the subdivisions in Chinese students are becoming more explicit. Like-minded Chinese students have found each other during this strike and we came together. We'll continue our activism while many of the elitists will continue to stay that way. In terms of outreach, there's a long way to go. In the future, we can change this dynamic if Chinese international students can alter their understanding of social justice and inequality from "what does that mean for me?" towards ideas of radical justice for all.

Yueran: My understanding is that the conventional stereotype of the "rich Chinese international student" whose tuition dollars keep US universities afloat is usually applied to undergraduate students. Among graduate students, economic precarity is a pervasive reality. I've been a union organizer at Berkeley for almost five years, and I haven't come across a single Chinese grad worker who does not live in poverty.

Some Chinese workers did say they were satisfied with the contracts and voted yes. But I don't think they did so because they were "rich" or "privileged." Instead, I think it was because their expectations were so low. Working under capitalism means your boss and the entire ideological apparatus of the society work hard to lower your expectations so that you think you are worthless and deserve nothing, and are therefore grateful for even a slight piece of mercy the boss throws down. The art of labor organizing, therefore, lies in elevating workers' expectations, and in making workers believe they deserve a truly dignified life if they fight for it.

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Over the course of the strike, much of what I worked on was helping a group of militant organizers (primarily based in humanities departments) who were pushing for the strategy of a long-haul, sustainable strike, to talk to STEM workers, many of whom were unprepared for such a strike. It's true that some STEM workers are much better paid than those in the humanities, but even the STEM wages are absolutely not living wages! With STEM workers, as I argued, we should be centered on elevating expectations and communicating a power analysis, in order to convey to our fellow co-workers that all of us do deserve a true living wage, and that we do have the power to fight for and win it (with an effective strike strategy).

At the end of the day, most workers stay in a labor struggle because they feel like having a personal stake in it. And in many cases, this personal stake is contingent upon organizers cultivating a bold confidence among workers so that they have high expectations and refuse to settle for anything less than what they deserve. Without this sense of confidence and power, of course many workers would feel "comfortable" with whatever marginal improvements the boss is willing to make. And indeed, our union leadership's strategy to win a "yes" vote on the contracts exactly hinged upon lowering workers' expectations and intimidating workers into believing they did not deserve much and did not have any power to win anymore.

Yiwen: Among graduate students who are becoming financially independent from their families, although there are class differences, there is also a sense of shared precarity within the academy that helps bridge the gap between students from wealthy and working-class families. However, I am not sure if class differences explain the relative apathy of the silent majority I mentioned below. In my personal power mapping experience on the UCI campus, “rich international students” are definitely an important and interesting group that needs more organizing.

Because of the individualistic way the UC and our union leadership frames contract negotiations, workers tend to use their personal experiences, instead of the most marginalized and precarious colleagues’ perspectives, as the basis on which they vote. And multiple international students at UCI have expressed to me that they are financially comfortable and would vote yes for any contracts. To break this atomization of workers, we need a solidarity discourse that confronts these narratives with a sense of urgency and moral pressure, and constantly analyzes the ideological pitfalls that rich students tend to fall into in order to counteract their reactionary forces.

LC: Did Chinese international students face any specific difficulties engaging with the graduate student organizing team or UAW? What were some key challenges and successes in organizing Chinese international students?

Yiwen: One common difficulty not specific to Chinese students is the lack of transparency in the way UAW 2865 operates. From my experience, Organizing Committee meetings are not particularly hospitable to many rank-and-file members, with its union jargon and top-down bureaucratic style of organization. This could easily turn off international students, especially those feeling out of place in American campus culture. Even as someone who has been active in different union meetings on campus way before the bargaining process last year, I was often confused about the dates of union elections, how certain stewards got elected, when and where certain organizing strategies were decided, how to increase membership input in our union’s core decision-making process, and so on.

It was only later during the strike that I realized these were kept vague and at times secret by design. And in hindsight, at least on UCI campus, a lot of everyday organizing in the union involved leaders gatekeeping information while excluding radical voices, largely reinforced by the dominance of the conservative caucus and the lack of *de facto* accountability in our bylaws.

There is not enough space here to tap deeper into the UAW 2865’s political history, but to put it briefly, our union local has been under the control of the conservative admin caucus for decades, with the exception of the AWDU leadership from 2011 to 2016. It remains debatable whether AWDU activists made strategically wise decisions when they were in power, but [the internal politics of UAW 2865](#) they contextualized for us provides an important background for understanding why it felt so difficult for rank-and-file members to engage with the UAW organizing infrastructure. In the aftermath of AWDU’s leadership, the admin caucus has transformed itself from the previous business unionist model to a newer, populist model of organizing from above. Put simply, albeit having “educate, agitate, organize” as one of the key slogans, the conservative union leadership has been organizing workers without educating them.

At times, this involved [tactics](#) such as majoritarianism, misinformation campaigns, weaponizing identity politics, divisive rhetorics, and self-victimization. For example, one rhetoric circulated by union staffcore is the dichotomy between “professional” unionists and “radical” anti-unionists. This very much appeals to academic workers who tend to trust legal experts’ scientific, rational, and realistic accounts as opposed to hyper-politicized “anarchists’” idealist, minoritarian, and irrational approaches. This arbitrary dichotomy serves a significant ideological and mystifying function throughout our strike, putting union leadership on a moral and intellectual high ground.

For future workers' actions, the UC Irvine Solidarity Group has compiled [a letter summarizing the key strategic lessons learned](#) this time as well as [a comprehensive resource archive](#). As a member of the group, I truly believe in the importance of building rank-and-file power from below to counteract the admin caucus/staffcore's conservative tactics. Rank-and-file members within the UAW have been mobilizing demands for democratization within the union, like pushing for the "[one member, one vote](#)" campaign in the national union. And more work could be done to preserve our movement's institutional memory, and pass on these lessons to the next generation of graduate workers.

We can continue to build rank-and-file workers' power in the union, like demanding transparency through active participation in union meetings, holding corrupt union leaders accountable, organizing political education to educate union members of their basic rights as workers, trade union politics, and the broader struggle against capitalism. Indeed, this strike has prepared opportunities for rank-and-file workers to prepare for a longer fight in the future, and offered us an opportunity to meet each other. We organized strong mutual aid communities across campuses, and built up effective and sustainable organizational structures independent of our union's formal branches.

Yueran: As someone who organized at the UC for a long time and also had organizing experiences at other U.S. universities, I've seen how hard organizing Chinese student workers can get, due to a prevalent sense of apathy, cynicism and fear towards labor action that in no small part reflected the cultural symptoms of authoritarian Social Darwinist neoliberal capitalism back in China.

Exactly because of this, I was absolutely impressed and touched by the degree of participation and engagement of Chinese student workers in this strike, as evidenced by active discussions in WeChat groups, a strong picket presence, the prominence of Chinese-language signs on the picket line, and in many cases, the crucial role played by Chinese student organizers in organizing their departments. The pre-existing organizing infrastructure that took years to develop was an important part of how this happened. Here, it is also important to acknowledge that the union leadership and staff organizers did (half-heartedly) work to foster Chinese worker-organizers and allocate resources to support such organizing over the previous few years.

What's more, an elaborate plan was developed on multiple campuses to utilize digital platforms like WeChat to build momentum and spread information in the lead-up to the strike. Once the strike began, these WeChat groups and channels were not only important for sharing information and updates, but also for further strengthening the sense of community, trust and collective energy among Chinese strikers. Workers were able to see that no one would be striking alone, and that in committing to the strike, they would be joining a large community of Chinese workers supporting each other.

I agree with Yiwen that the existing union leadership used a variety of rhetorical and manipulative tactics to mislead and scare workers into accepting a concessionary strategy. At the same time, I'd like to emphasize that, at least at Berkeley, the union leadership and their aligned organizers were able to hold rather strong sway over a significant population of student workers because workers did genuinely trust and respect them. And such trust and respect were built over many years as well, as many organizers who now occupy the conservative wing of the union leadership did spend an incredible amount of time reaching out to and building connections with rank-and-file workers in a large number of (particularly STEM) departments.

Through concrete workplace and departmental actions, these organizers gradually garnered a reputation as staunch advocates and caretakers of workers' interests. In many departments at Berkeley, the majority of workers voted yes on the contracts partly because the lead organizers in these departments, who either were part of the concessionary wing of the bargaining teams or took

on part-time paid staff roles directed by the union leadership, did command a high level of respect among their colleagues. Given all of this, it was all the more important that we had a pre-existing network of Chinese organizers organically embedded in their departments. This partly explains why Chinese workers made up pockets of dissent in many overwhelmingly “yes” departments at Berkeley.

An added benefit of having a pre-existing organizing infrastructure was that, because many Chinese-language organizing spaces could not be surveilled by the union leadership and specifically cultivated trust among Chinese workers, Chinese organizers were able to utilize these spaces to organize in a way that was more independent and critical of the strike strategy adopted by the official union leadership. [3]

Paula: In the humanities, we had a picket line for literature, history, philosophy, cognitive science and so on. On these picket lines, internationals and locals were very united and we didn’t stop talking about NSRT. In my experience, some Chinese students in STEM said it was hard to reach out and felt isolated in their departments. Sometimes Chinese students may not feel comfortable leaving their own community and reaching out to others, which is all the more reason there needs to be intentional outreach to these students by union organizers. In school in China, we didn’t receive the same type of education in terms of social justice and workers’ rights. For Chinese students in STEM, even after leaving China, they may not have the same chance to learn these cultural codes to start a conversation with local students about these topics.

In my view, there is a general lack of notion of fair wages amongst Chinese students, who may not know they’re getting exploited. They might think “It’s a shitty contract but being a graduate student means getting paid little and getting exploited. I’m happy with what I can get.” The lack of awareness helps the exploitation continue without anyone questioning it. Social Darwinism prevails in China. Few question if the exploitation or status quo is okay, but just internalize the oppression into themselves. They ask, “Why can’t you put up with it and one day make it to the powerful side?” instead of questioning if it’s okay to have the world constituted in this way.

To me, UCSD is the most polarized and conservative campus, which you can see in the [results of the vote](#). Many Vote-No hardliners wanted to continue the struggle for the most vulnerable but the other side didn’t even want to have a conversation with us. There was outreach in some way to these students, though, but it included a lot of misinformation. I was doing walk-ins with undecided international graduate students but the Vote-Yes people already came by and told them to vote yes. The students said oh yeah it’s a big win, and they told us the wages would be much higher. There was a lot of trust in the union without verifying what they were told.

For those that actually went to verify the information, they came to find the contract really wasn’t as great as they were told. For example, UAW distributed a lot of flyers saying that there was going to be an 80% raise but they didn’t mention that it would come in October 2024. I know an international PhD student who has a lot of experience in labor organizing back home but this time in California he said it was so hard to live and survive here that he would have to drop out and go back to their home country. For those people, they can’t wait until 2024 [for better conditions in the next round of negotiations, as Yes-Voters argued].

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LC: Do you have any thoughts on how this labor struggle went in the US compared to how students would approach labor and wage exploitation in China? Since there was so much concurrent political energy in China with the [White Paper Revolution](#) and Chinese international students at the UCs, did

you see any resonance or overlap?

Paula: At UCSD, how many of the students viewed the strike reflects how they view labor struggles in China. Many of these students are elite and come from a privileged social class in China, so it's hard for them to take into account exploitation in general. But we can see similarities between these authoritarian socialist or so-called "democratic" capitalist states—the elites dominate the political and economic realm and benefit the most from the well-established social order. Neither the political institutions in China nor in the US are able to address inequality, but rather create and sustain a hierarchical society. That's the resonance.

We tried at some point to spread the word of the UC strike back home, though. I consulted some scholars in China to see about the possibility of publishing grassroots voices in the UC strike through a newspaper. They said it could be really hard because of self-censorship of the media industry in today's China. A strike like this may raise doubt among the working class and potentially cause agitation in China. In the end, we only got to publish it on WeChat channels.

Yueran: One common thread between our struggle and many labor struggles that have happened in China is how the "student" status is deliberately used to mask and justify super-exploitation. Student workers whose labor is appropriated to create profit for someone are denied the right to be treated fairly and with dignity because they are told they are not really "workers." We see this both with graduate workers in U.S. higher education and with Chinese "student interns" (实习生) sent by their vocational schools to work in manufacturing sweatshops, including Foxconn. In our strike at the UC, as well as past struggles waged by Chinese "student interns," we see how workers could see through the "smokescreen" of the student status to demand fair treatment as workers. As our strike entered December, I was also closely following the struggles of resident trainee-students (实习医生) in Chinese medical schools, which displayed some similar dynamics.

Yiwen: There is a lot of overlap between labor politics in China and here in the US. First of all, within the UC Chinese international student workers statewide organizing group, most of the active organizers are long-term observers and participants in labor rights activism at home. Some individuals in the core organizing team were involved in labor activist networks at home, and had labor NGO experiences. At the minimum, most have been closely following labor news and analyzing labor relations and class struggles at home. The UC strike provides many of us with first-hand organizing experience in a relatively safe political environment. Second, within the broader communities of UC Chinese strikers, a lot of labor discourses from home are borrowed.

On the one hand, similar to the common usage of political languages from the 20th century and especially the Maoist era in labor struggles in China, many UC strikers put slogans like "Labor is Sacred" (劳动神圣), "Unity is Strength" (团结就是力量) on the signs they used in the picket lines. On the other hand, more contemporary languages are incorporated into our everyday discussions of the UC strike. Slogans like "We are Slackers" (我们不是打工人), "We are strikers (我们不是员工), not "employees" (我们不是打工人), are examples of the workers' effort to effectively reach their Chinese colleagues with more culturally intelligible vocabularies. Thirdly, student worker activists from China are as assertive (if not more) as their domestic counterparts when it comes to labor politics.

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From my observation, labor politics seems to be a safer and less polarizing field for political engagement than Chinese democracy, feminist, Hong Kong and Taiwan, and ethnic and racial justice movements for many student workers. On the one hand, there is an ironic correlation between the

relative invisibility of labor politics in general Chinese public discourse and Chinese students' willingness to think about and participate in labor politics.

In other words, people who don't closely follow labor news at home don't usually associate class struggle with a dangerous zone of political participation. On the other hand, the official political education in China seems to provide many non-social science/humanities students with a set of systematic Marxist political language and a basic sense of socialist tendency compared to other domestic or international STEM students in the UC system. While at home, these official discourses of Marxism and Maoism serve as ideological myth-making, it does unintentionally produce a surplus socialist consciousness among Chinese international students in the "capitalist West."

Having said that, one obvious distinction is the extent to which Chinese students are able to participate as organizers in the US, as there is little room to organize beyond commenting on and analyzing struggles at home. Another less apparent difference is the sense of unity I personally experienced within the Chinese communities during the UC strike. In hindsight, it strikes me that despite the hyper-polarization within the UC strike between long haul and "escalate as hell" strategies, between Yes- and No-Voters, and so on, the Chinese organizing group has been able to maintain a healthy deliberative environment.

Political divisions existing in the communities did not become divisive for the groups, partly thanks to the fact that organizers made a conscious decision to not discuss politics beyond the strike in these groups. In addition, I think the practicality and urgency of the strike temporarily shelved various "divisive topics."

LC: Experiences varied across campuses given the differential status of each school within the UC system. Would you like to share any specific experiences you had with the strike at your particular campus and what that might mean for future struggle?

Paula: Yes, UCSF, UC Berkeley, and UCLA had different wage tiers, and other campuses weren't given any explanation about that. There are also other tiers beyond the inter-campus ones. At all UC campuses, there are different steps for Graduate Student Researchers (GSRs) and it also varies by department. For example, literature and humanities are in lower steps compared to computer science and neuroscience in steps 9 or 10. In my outreach, I talked to some of those students and they were quite happy with their raise.

For TAs, we're not getting as much, even in 2024. Then they also created a new tier for TAs, if you have 2 years of experience, then you get paid more. Of course, more experienced TAs said they were happy with that raise but that leaves the newer and most vulnerable TAs out. In creating these steps, the UCs and UAW turned us against each other since those who got higher wages were happy and wanted to end the strike when those on the lower end of the scale didn't.

We were using grassroots means to spread the word to friends and across departments about why to vote no, like in Discord and Signal. But then we encountered Yes-Voters who would say, "If you don't think the money is enough, go do Uber or invest in real estate." I can barely even afford to rent an apartment in La Jolla, so I should go buy a house? Meanwhile, many students of color whose parents were undocumented or asylum seekers or coming from war-torn countries didn't have sufficient financial support from family, and now since they can't get paid enough, they likely have to leave graduate school.

One of our key successes at UCSD was grassroots outreach. In the humanities picket line, we started a fundraiser. First, we brought in our own donations to set up an outdoor kitchen and we gave food not just to strikers but to undergrads, and anyone who was food insecure. Students were welcome to

donate anything, even a dollar. During the \$1 meals, some Chinese students who I didn't even know added me on WeChat and wanted to donate food, huge boxes of potatoes and turkey legs. Many of these students may not be super vocal in the struggle but they participated, and food is a good way to bring people together.

This can be a way to keep the legacy of the strike going and pass it on to future strikers. After the strike ended, we still had adequate funds to continue with our mutual aid, which we want to continue since the strike didn't address the needs of the most vulnerable. Those interested in learning more about our work can visit our [Instagram](#). I served our first post-strike lunch last week and it's rolling!

Yueran: Berkeley has historically been a "stronghold" for the union leadership and staff organizers, which means student workers were relatively well-organized through the organizing structures they developed. Thus, student workers at Berkeley were effectively organized in massive numbers to vote in favor of authorizing the strike and commit to withholding labor and showing up on the picket line in the early phase of the strike.

But then, the organizers who aired criticism of the union leadership's strike strategy and advocated for alternative strategies were often received with hostility from organizers more aligned with the leadership. Because of this dynamic (combined with the extra pay raise for Berkeley that entrenched a [tiered system](#)), many of those advocating for the "Vote No" position felt very isolated. Several Chinese organizers report that they were pretty much the sole voice (or part of a small group) in their respective departments openly advocating for a no vote.

My observation of how Chinese student workers experienced the strike lends powerful support to [Rosa Luxemburg's claim](#) that class consciousness emerged and developed over the course of struggle itself. The very experience of being together with other strikers on the picket line and in online communities gave workers a clear, concrete sense of what solidarity means.

The very experience of coming together to fight a nasty boss (and later, an increasingly unaccountable union leadership as well) gave workers a first-hand understanding of class struggle. Perhaps in part thanks to this embryonic class consciousness growing out of the strike, some Chinese student workers showed strong empathy, as fellow workers engaged in struggle, when the Foxconn workers' insurgency in Zhengzhou [broke out at the same time](#) as our strike entered the second week. These lessons were experienced in a profound and sometimes more painful way particularly in the later phase of the strike, as workers were compelled to figure out how to sustain their struggle and fight multiple enemies (the boss and the union leadership) all at once.

JN
Promise Li
Paula Zhou
Huang Yiwen
Zhang Yueran

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P.S.

Lausan

<https://lausancollective.com/2023/chinese-student-workers-uc-strike/>

Footnotes

[1] Yiwen: Staffcore is an informal phrase used to describe union staff who fall in line with the politics of the conservative caucus (the administrative caucus) of UAW International. The UAW 2865 “staffcore” on the Executive board controls most of the strategic decisions and public relations management during and beyond the bargaining process.

[2] For example, an important Chinese organizer who played a key role in organizing the Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics leading up to the strike was someone I first met in 2019. Initially he was quite suspicious of labor organizing, but gradually changed his mind and became willing to do more organizing because of trust-building over a couple of years.

[3] The official strategy focused on creating massive picket spectacles in order to secure a quick victory, rather than ensuring that workers can withhold labor in a sustainable way for a long period of time. In WeChat discussion groups and through organizing meetings and conversations, however, Chinese organizers had worked to win people over to the strategy of a long-haul, sustainable strike even before the strike started. For example, in those organizing spaces we had specifically and elaborately encouraged lab-based student researchers to adopt a flexible model of work stoppage, in a way that would not have happened in any English-language organizing spaces.