

“I was forced to move all my belongings into a storage unit”

# Homeless astrophysics professor speaks out on poverty pay at UCLA

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A TikTok video of a UCLA astrophysics professor made homeless by unlivable wages has struck a nerve globally. “I was paid so poorly last year and currently that I was forced to move all of my belongings into a public storage unit and I can no longer live in my one-bedroom apartment in Westwood [UCLA-adjacent area],” McKeown explained in a TikTok video which has garnered more than 1.6 million views. McKeown’s video has gone viral and the majority of comments show a healthy stream of support stemming from various workers and students around the globe.

That trust was betrayed, as UCLA and the union had worked together to keep faculty wages stagnant, forcing him into a desperate financial situation. McKeown’s union, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), plays a key role in maintaining this exploitative structure. McKeown pointed out that his salary was set by the union, not directly by UCLA, yet the AFT has done nothing to mobilize its members for meaningful action.

Moreover, the UC itself is facing a half-billion-dollar budget gap and the Board of Regents almost universally approved a tuition hike this week. “Teachers should be one of the highest paid workers in society,” one viewer said. “For those who say ‘well, you should get another job or in a different industry’ are missing the point,” added another.

McKeown relied on his savings to make ends meet for the time being. By the time McKeown signed his new two-year contract with UCLA, his savings were completely dried up.

I asked to renegotiate my salary because I realized that I was in denial, that I wasn’t being paid enough, and that I needed to negotiate with the department for a higher amount,” McKeown said. “I asked for \$100,000 because technically I should be making more than \$100,000.”

McKeown graduated from the University of California Irvine in 2022 with a PhD in physics and then did a year as a postdoc at UCI while he looked for a new job. It took 10 months before he was hired as a full-time lecturer at UCLA in September of 2023. “It was a lot longer than people said it would take,” McKeown acknowledged.

“I could not make \$70,000 a year work,” he added. “Well in advance before I started making any of these TikTok videos, I told them, ‘I’m sorry, we have to renegotiate this. I want to keep teaching in person, but I’m about to lose my apartment.’ They said, nope, we’re not going to do anything, no changes, you get a second job, go work somewhere else.”

McKeown entered the job optimistic: “They said, this is a great role, the benefits are great, you’ll do wonderful. The salary seemed a little bit low for me, but I didn’t have any experience living in Los Angeles. I lived in Irvine at the time in graduate housing. I asked if they had housing assistance and Per Krauss, the person who hired me, my supervisor, said no they didn’t. So I found an apartment for \$2,500 a month. It was the cheapest one that I could find.”

“I trusted them,” he commented. “I trusted that it’s a good school. I’m not worried about this. I’m just excited to have a job. They’ll probably give me a good raise and everything will be fine.”

McKeown said that he instructs close to 300 to 400 students each semester and is an active researcher in quantum entanglement and partial measurement, which has applications to quantum computing. “I did the math,” McKeown added. “Each student pays about four to five thousand dollars in tuition to take my course. UCLA is making five million dollars off of my work. I’m bringing five million dollars to the school as a result of my work.”

teaching. And I felt like it was a little weird that they're paying me so poorly."

Shortly after his video became viral, McKeown relocated to a new residence in San Diego. Since he lost his previous apartment in LA, he had to move his classes online.

In response, UCLA administrators demanded McKeown return to teaching classes in person or take a leave of absence.

"I can't teach in person, I have no place to stay and I have no refrigerator to keep my insulin cold," he told UCLA administrators.

McKeown says UCLA allowed him time to receive his doctor's accommodation giving him permission to switch his classes online, which his doctor did approve.

Regardless, UCLA denied his doctor's accommodation and retaliated against McKeown by placing him on forced leave. He explained that he is still unsure when and how he will be paid and that he has been left in the dark throughout the entire process.

"They did not warn me, nor did they warn my students that the classes were going to be taken away from me," McKeown said. "They just took them away from me, removed the links, and so I could no longer reach my students and that was just like that, without any warning, and put a different person in charge of teaching them."

McKeown spoke at length of how the outcome of his fight will set the bar for future professors and educators joining the field.

"This is a huge crisis," McKeown stated. "I got an email from a professor who is also living out of his car. He doesn't work at UCLA, he works at several community colleges and he's living out of his truck. He said that he's too embarrassed to speak about this in public but secretly that he's living out of his truck."

"This is a disgrace. All of the graduate students are coming into a labor market where their dreams are being shattered. They get a PhD in physics and then they can't even use that PhD or use any of that knowledge that they've acquired. It's like getting a degree in medicine, becoming a surgeon and then unable to practice surgery."

McKeown is demanding UCLA administrators such as Stuart Brown and Brian Keating step down.

"They [Keating and Brown] are lowering the bar and the opportunities of pay for everyone, all to make themselves and the UCs richer. It's a total disgrace and I refuse to back down."

McKeown urged other educators in every country to join his fight for fair compensation despite the fear or threats of

retaliation. "We have to use our rights as a democracy to voice our concerns and speak out. Most lecturers and people in my position are afraid to speak out and I don't blame them. They fear retaliation. But the more of us that stand together in this fight and speak out about this, the stronger our voices become."

"I'm setting a precedent," he said, "and I believe that other people will join me in the future, and we will fight, and we will win fair wages for all of us professors and lecturing professors at the UCs and eventually the rest of the country and eventually the rest of the world."

"All of these systems are intertwined. We live in a globalist world and our countries are more and more interconnected as the speed of communication increases. This battle and this victory doesn't just change things for us in our immediate vicinity. It changes things for everybody in the state of California, the United States, in China and the rest of the world."

"Everybody, all the educated public and the professors in other countries are watching this too and they're learning from it as well. This is not just a statewide movement or a national movement, this is a global movement to increase and properly compensate the work of high value educators such as myself in all fields that are taught, not just physics."



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