

Workers and graduate students end five-day strike at Yale

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Thousands of workers and students engaged in daily demonstrations last week at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut during a five-day strike against the university for better wages, pensions, and organizing rights. Four unions representing more than 5,000 clerical and technical workers, dietary staff, and graduate student-teaching assistants called the walkout.

According to one estimate, more than 95 percent of the 1,200 technical service staff as well as two-thirds of the 2,900 clerical workers walked out. About 1,000-graduate student teaching assistants participated in the action, while all 150 dietary workers from the Yale-New Haven hospital struck. SEIU District 1199, which represents the hospital dietary workers, is attempting to organize the 1,800 other hospital workers.

Dining halls were closed, dormitory bathrooms were not cleaned and some building repairs were suspended. Managers were forced to run the university's power plant and answer telephones. Professors honoring the strike held classes off campus.

This is the eighth strike at Yale in the last 35 years. However, this struggle involves more workers than in any previous walkout. The last strike, which lasted for two months, took place in 1996.

Clerical workers and technical and service workers, represented by Locals 34 and 35 of the Hotel and Restaurant Employees International, have been without a contract for 13 months. The Graduate Employees Student Organization, a group of more than 1,000 graduate student-teaching assistants, struck to demand union recognition. The 150 food workers at the Yale-New Haven Hospital have been without a contract for two years.

The unions have rejected the university's offers of 4 percent a year for six years for the clerical workers and 3 percent a year for its technical workers. The unions

are seeking four-year contracts that include retroactive raises of 4 percent for Local 34 and 3 percent for Local 35 for the first year. They are also seeking raises of 8.5 percent for Local 34 and 5.5 percent for Local 35 for the next three years. Union leaders said that they have already lowered their wage demands no less than four times in negotiations with Yale during the last year. Nevertheless, the university has refused to budge from its offers. According to Yale, service and technical workers earn an average of only \$30,342 per year and clerical workers earn an average of \$33,717 a year.

Another key issue is pensions. The unions charge that many workers retire in poverty after 30 years of service, receiving less than \$800 a month. Yale has offered to raise pensions by only 11 to 18 percent. Since pension benefits are already so paltry, this would do little to improve the income for retirees. A Yale spokesperson has justified their position by claiming that this is a generous offer, considering the fact that workers throughout the state of Connecticut are experiencing wage and benefit cuts or are losing their jobs due to the economic downturn.

Yale accounts for fully 20 percent of the jobs in the city of New Haven, which has been increasingly hard-hit by the economic downturn, with the city administration threatening severe teacher layoffs this year. The university, however, is sitting on an endowment worth \$11 billion, and is not facing a comparable crisis. Nonetheless, Yale has seized upon the wider economic crisis as weapon against its workers.

The workers and students have also linked their demands while the university insists that they negotiate separately. Yale and other universities are hoping that the Bush Administration appointees on the National Labor Relations Board will reverse a previous ruling

and declare that graduate student teaching assistants are students, not employees. The graduate student organization has been seeking union recognition for more than 10 years. Yale officials also assert that they have nothing to do with the 150 dietary workers on strike because they claim that the hospital is a separate institution from the university.

The unions limited the strike to five days, timing it for the week before students were scheduled to leave the campus for their two-week spring break. While union officials from Locals 34 and 35 had previously vowed to resume the walkout after the break if there is no progress in negotiations, there were press reports last week indicating that they may be backing off from this threat.



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