

Yale University workers strike

Alan Whyte
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Eighty-three workers were arrested August 29, the third day of a strike against Yale University. The confrontation took place as at least 3,000 striking clerical, technical and maintenance workers and their supporters demonstrated in downtown New Haven, Connecticut. About 100 police officers, many in riot gear, placed the strikers under arrest as the workers engaged in a sit-down protest at three intersections in the area. Police officials placed all of them in plastic handcuffs, charged them with disorderly conduct and then later released them.

The rally took place as incoming freshman were first arriving to the campus. As a result of the melee and other planned protests by the unions, Yale President Richard C. Levin's traditional address to the freshman on that day was postponed.

Due to the walkout, Yale's dining halls have been closed, the phones at some departments have gone unanswered and the cleaning of some of the bathrooms has been delayed. Classes are scheduled to begin this week and many professors are expected to hold their classes off campus in sympathy with the strikers.

More than 2,500 workers walked off their jobs, making this the second strike at Yale this year and the ninth since 1968. The two bargaining units are Local 34 and Local 35 of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union (HERE), representing a total of nearly 4,000 workers who are striking for improved pension benefits and wages. Also joining the walkout are about 150 food service workers, members of the New England Healthcare Employees Union, District 1199, who are striking Yale-New Haven hospital. District 1199 is seeking a new contract and is attempting to organize the other workers at the hospital.

The most contentious issue for the clerical, technical and mechanical workers at Yale University, who have been working without a new contract since January 2002, is that of pensions. According to HERE

spokesmen, workers who have retired after 20 or more years have an average pension of \$7,500 a year, an income that places most of the retirees in poverty. Yale is offering a 14% increase in pension income, while the union is asking for a 72% increase.

The two sides also disagree on the issue of wage hikes. The union has accepted Yale's wage offers for the first two years of a proposed contract, but disagree on the next four years, with the differences ranging from 2 to 4 percent per year for the two unions. According to the university, service and technical workers earn an average of about only \$30,000 per year and the clerical workers earn an average of about \$33,000 a year.

The unions have limited their struggle before this current strike to a five-day walkout in March of this year. At that time about 1,000-graduate student teaching assistants went on strike demanding union recognition. While many of the graduate students are supporting the picket lines, they themselves are not currently on strike and union recognition is not one of the demands of the current walkout.

The university has consistently taken a very hard stance in its bargaining with the unions, consciously taking advantage of the difficult economic times in the state of Connecticut as a whole and in New Haven in particular. Yale is the city's biggest employer, accounting for 20 percent of total jobs.

While the union has claimed that Yale is a wealthy institution with an \$11 billion endowment, the union leadership is not actually demanding that the university accede to its pension and wage demands. It is only asking that the entire dispute be resolved through binding arbitration, something Yale refuses to do.

While attempting to leave the fate of its membership to an outside arbitrator, the union leadership has also worked to subordinate the struggle to its political alliance with the Democratic Party. The unions have

promoted various Democrats as friends of the strikers, despite the fact that they have joined with the Republican Party in upholding the interests of major corporate institutions such as Yale.

The union bureaucracy has provided a campaign platform for two candidates in the Democratic Party primaries for US president, including Joseph Lieberman, the unabashedly pro-big business senator from Connecticut. Democratic Party politician Jesse Jackson has spoken before rallies and was arrested in a civil disobedience publicity stunt on Labor Day. Meanwhile, Jackson, who has a long record of collaborating with the AFL-CIO to sabotage workers' struggles, has been actively cajoling both sides in the hospital workers dispute to come to an agreement that will put an end to that strike.



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