

University of California service workers strike for a day

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Service workers from each of the nine University of California (UC) campuses and four medical centers, scattered between San Diego and Santa Cruz, walked off their jobs April 14 for a one-day strike against low wages.

Most of the 7,300 service workers who participated in the walkout are represented by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). The service workers, many of whom are immigrants and minorities, perform a wide range of jobs at the UC, serving as custodians, food servers, cooks, bus drivers, mail deliverers and grounds keepers.

The union's contract with the university expired June 30, 2004, and was extended to January 31, 2005, to facilitate further negotiations. Since July 2004, the union bargaining committee has met with UC management 27 times. Negotiations have stalled on more than 30 issues, including fair wages and an end to discrimination and favoritism in hiring and promotions. Ultimately, an impasse was declared, and both sides have since entered a state-mandated mediation and fact-finding process.

Fed up with the UC's disingenuous approach to the mediation process, 92 percent of union members voted to authorize a strike in late March. On April 11, the union announced it would finally heed the vote of members and organize a one-day strike by the end of the week.

The walkout marked the first strike for UC service workers and the first strike ever at the university's medical center in Davis. The last UC strike was in 2002, when lecturers at several campuses walked out for two days to pressure administrators to provide greater job security and higher wages.

The gross inadequacy of service workers' wages is documented in a recent study entitled "High Ideals,

Low Pay: a Wage Analysis of UC Service Workers." The study, by the National Economic Development and Law Center (NEDLC), demonstrates that the wages of most UC service workers fail to provide for basic needs such as rent, food, child care, health care and transportation.

The report revealed that 46 percent of UC service employees earn wages that do not meet the basic needs of two parents raising two children; 93 percent earn wages that would not meet the basic needs for a single adult raising one child (that figure jumps to nearly 100 percent if the UC worker is the sole breadwinner of a two-adult family); 35 percent earn wages insufficient even to support one single, childless employee.

Consequently, all UC food service workers with one child earned wages low enough to meet income eligibility requirements for up to nine publicly funded welfare programs. A large number of service workers are forced to take on two or three additional jobs just to make ends meet.

AFSCME Local 3299 has filed unfair labor practice charges with state regulators to demand that the university give workers information it is illegally withholding, bargain on important issues like workload and workers' rights as the law requires, and stop attempting to intimidate workers.

The university has routinely cited the state budget crisis as the reason for its exploitative labor practices as well as its repeated tuition increases. However, this explanation does not hold water.

The UC depends on the state for 19 percent of its funding, whereas the California State University (CSU) system receives up to 72 percent of its funding from the state. But the CSU pays its service workers salaries up to 15 percent higher than those received by UC service workers. Moreover, other community colleges and

some private institutions in California, such as Kaiser Permanente, pay their service workers up to 26 percent more than the UC pays its service workers.

In fact, according to its financial report for 2004, the UC's balance sheet is very healthy, showing a \$786 million profit last year, with more than \$5.2 billion in reserve.

At many of the UC campuses—including Davis and Santa Cruz—service workers were joined on the picket line by the Coalition of University Employees (CUE), a union that represents 16,000 UC clerical employees.

The University of California Student Association (UCSA), the official system-wide association of student governments, passed a resolution last week supporting the demands of UC service workers and their right to go on strike. Jennifer Lilla, president of UCSA, said, “With the resolution, we are demonstrating that low-wage workers’ issues are a priority for students. If workers go on strike and it affects the quality of services that students have already paid for, we will hold the university responsible.”

UC students have been hit by an unprecedented series of tuition hikes over the past two years that have raised their education cost by up to 30 percent.

The solidarity demonstrated by UC students and UC laborers testifies to a generalized dissatisfaction felt at all levels on campus. The only groups that consistently benefit are the Regents and private corporations that contract with the UC for almost unlimited access to state-of-the-art facilities and virtually free student labor.

Instead of paying market value for the wealth of physical and human resources they receive, corporate donors are encouraged by the University Office of Technology Transfer to contract for collaborative research projects, which, according to the university, “provide industry with an excellent means for leveraging research funding by capitalizing on the respective strengths of all the organizations involved in the research activity.”

The limited reinvestments made by corporate donors are rarely spent on general improvements or maintenance. Instead, most reinvestment is administered by the corporate donor and often goes directly into programs that will turn a profit for the donor.

Considering the mass of evidence showing that the

UC has been willfully bargaining in bad faith, that service workers’ wages are well below the market average, and in view of the overwhelming support for a strike among union members, the question that emerges is why the union limited its action to just one day. When asked why the strike was not longer, union representative Cody Potter told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “Well, there is a lot of uncertainty among the workers. This is the first service workers’ strike at the UC and the first strike ever at the UC Davis medical center, so a lot of the workers are hesitant.”

However, workers on the picket line at UC Davis expressed a much more militant opinion on the question. Asked whether she thought the one-day action would be effective, senior custodian Isabella Rodriguez responded, “I don’t think the strike will improve the situation,” and then wondered out loud, “I don’t know why they didn’t plan a longer strike, or plan it on a day that would be more inconvenient for the UC?”

Sherry Cahill of the mail division said, “I wish it were longer.... It would hurt more to hit them on a Monday.”

Scott, another service worker in the mail division, said that while he thought union representation had improved of late, “the union hasn’t really seemed to care too much about the increased workload and the low pay until now...but we get screwed around by so many people, we may just be suspicious of everyone.”

Bob, a custodian at UC Davis, said, “Only recently has the union been getting workers fired up about the bad treatment. Wages have been lower than the cost of living for years, and the union was telling us that the UC was okay and that they were doing their best.” He added, “Until now, they have been like paid public relations agents for the UC.”

When asked if he thought the union would organize an all-out strike if the UC continued its unfair treatment, he said, “They better, because if they don’t, the workers might just strike without them.”



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