

Workers strike for cost of living at University of Minnesota

Our reporter
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Some 3,500 clerical, technical and healthcare workers at the University of Minnesota walked out on strike September 5th after negotiators for the administration refused to grant workers the average cost-of-living increase received by other state workers. The strike encompasses workers on five campuses in the cities of Morris, Duluth, Rochester, Crookston and the main campus, straddling the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul.

The beginning of the strike drew 1,000 workers to rally on the main campus' Northrop Mall and has won broad support from students, faculty, campus workers and other workers, such as truck drivers who service the university.

By a 72 percent margin, members of Locals 3260, 3800, 3801 and 3937 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) rejected the administration's offer of a 2.25 percent annual increase for clerical and technical workers and a 2.5 percent increase for healthcare workers. The unions charge that wages for striking campus workers have fallen by 4.8 percent over the past five years when related to inflation, while salaries for administrators have risen by an average 27 percent.

In a sleight of hand, the administration has tried to lump the raises they have proposed with normal 2 percent wage progressions, or what are called "step increases", within different job categories. This is an effort to create the impression that the university is providing a 4.25-4.5 percent annual increase. But in the case of striking health care workers, some 40 percent are already at the top of their scale and receiving a substandard annual wage.

Barbara Bezat, president of Local 3937, which represents technical workers, told the WSW, "AFSME Council 5 statewide lobbied the legislature for

additional funding for compensation. University President [Robert] Bruininks told the legislature and the Board of Regents that their budget allocation had 3.25 percent wage built into it for annual wage increases. But somewhere between the legislature and Morrill Hall [office of the president], one percent leaked out of that bucket.

"There's no public employer that we know of that adds the general annual wage increase to step wage increases. The university is trying to blur the line between the two. They've consistently told us two things over the years. The cost of steps is a wash. The other thing is that the wage at the top of the grid is the true value of the job class. But the university is now ignoring that past history of our working relationship. I work in the manuscripts division of the university libraries. My grid has 27 steps. I'm a 24-year employee and now on step 17.

"Their contract did not offer us what we need. It doesn't keep up with inflation. We're out in the workplace trying to survive on wages that make it very difficult to maintain a good standard of living."

The University's Board of Regents came under fire on the third day of the strike by protesters who carried out acts of civil disobedience to protest the board's endorsement of the administration's wage package for AFSCME workers. In contrast to the miserly treatment of striking workers, the board provided President Bruininks, who pulls down a \$450,000 salary, with a 17.5 percent increase over the next two years. It has been pointed out that Bruininks' 10 percent raise for this year alone, which amounts to \$38,000, is greater than the average \$34,000 annual salary of striking workers. The Regents protest ended with five people being arrested, cuffed and taken to the Hennepin County jail on charges of interfering with public

property.

Meanwhile, a number of university professors have moved their classes off campus as a way of demonstrating support for striking clerical workers. Their actions openly defy an order backed up by threats from university Provost Thomas Sullivan that would compel them to cross strikers' picket lines. In a letter to faculty members and teaching staff, Sullivan said, ““Every faculty member, graduate assistant and employee who is scheduled to teach, is expected to hold their classes, and to hold them on campus as originally scheduled. University employees who refuse to report to work as directed are considered under state law to be engaged in an illegal sympathy strike and are subject to discipline.”

It is not inappropriate to point out that the strike on the Twin Cities' campus takes place a short distance downriver from the wreckage of the collapsed Interstate 35W bridge that once spanned the Mississippi River and serves as an indictment of the profit system and its political and corporate elite who are ultimately responsible for the neglect of infrastructure.

Likewise, corporations, which more and more dominate university campuses across the United States and direct them in their own interests, are behind the drive to turn university workers, teaching assistants and faculty into a form of cheap labor while clamping down on academic freedom.



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