

California: University service workers struggle against poverty wages

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Over 8,500 University of California (UC) service workers and members of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) walked off their jobs at UC's 10 campuses and 5 hospitals early Monday morning to take part in a week-long strike action.

In May 97.5 percent of the workers voted to authorize a strike after nearly a year of negotiations during which AFSCME wasn't able to achieve a fraction of its original demands.

Among the union's demands is an increase in the minimum wage paid to members from \$10 to \$15 an hour at the end of the proposed contract term, along with the introduction of double time pay for members who work shifts of 12 hours or more.

The \$10 an hour wage, which not all, but a large portion of the membership currently receives, falls well below the US Department of Health and Human Services 2008 poverty threshold for a family of four.

A \$15 per hour wage would slightly exceed the threshold for a family of four but would still leave the service workers heavily reliant upon external support, including food stamps and state-provided medical care.

University officials are proceeding with ruthlessness. UC spokeswoman Nicole Savickas has cited the union's refusal thus far to drop the modest wage increase demand as evidence that it "has refused to come to the bargaining table" and "a lot of the proposals AFSCME has made have been unchanged from the beginning," meaning that either the \$5 increase is too much, or perhaps no increase should be given at all.

UC officials successfully sought a temporary restraining order against the AFSCME local Friday on the grounds that the union had not provided advance notice of the strike action. The union is contesting the

restraining order, arguing that the UC board had been notified the prior Thursday.

The University of California system itself is governed by the 26-member Board of Regents, 18 of whom are appointed by the governor of California, and seven of whom are ex officio members including Republican Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, Democratic Lieutenant Governor John Garamendi and Democratic State Assembly speaker Karen Bass, underscoring the direct involvement of the Democratic Party in driving down the living standards of these workers.

The AFSCME leadership is organically tied to these individuals, as well as to the Democratic Party as a whole, making the vast majority of its campaign contributions to Democrats and most recently issuing a ringing endorsement of Sen. Barack Obama, who they described as a "proven fighter on the issues our members care about most."

World Socialist Web Site reporters visited picket lines at the campuses of UC San Diego and Los Angeles on Thursday and spoke with workers at both locations.

Carlos Flores, a custodian at the University of California, Los Angeles, expressed frustration that the university could hire newer workers and pay them more than those who had been working for the university for years at the same position.

Flores at the same time noted that the university isn't hiring enough workers to keep up with job demands, forcing many to work outside of their job responsibilities. He said, "They're demanding more work from us, which means we have to work much faster with less quality and everybody suffers, including the students."

Many pickets at the UCLA location were angered that they were only asking for minimal wage and benefit increases while top university officials received salaries

of close to a million dollars each. Jorge Fernandez, an AFSCME member, said, “The old chancellor was making \$400,000 per year and the new one’s going to make \$900,000” while noting that, “The executives are making a lot of money for themselves. They don’t care about the little people.”

Kevin Griffiths, an AFSCME member at UC San Diego, also commented on the outrageous salaries and bonus packages given to administrators: “The bonuses that certain individuals on this campus are getting are ridiculous, and they don’t do anything.” The frustration at the enormous disparity in compensation and the utter disrespect the UC board has for the workers was quite evident in Griffiths’ tone.

Dina, who has been working for the university for five years, told a WSWs reporter that she has not received a single pay increase during that entire period. She expressed deep frustration with the situation, noting that, “We don’t get a raise automatically. Every year we have to fight for a raise whether it is just a buck or even 25 cents.”

On the UC San Diego campus, many striking AFSCME service workers held out hope that the strike action would ultimately result in meaningful gains, but they expressed frustration with the government and both major political parties.

Typical were the comments of Griffiths, a lead custodian of four years and a Vietnam veteran with two master’s degrees. “I know how budgets work. With all that money, you can’t afford to help 75,000 hard working people?” He also spoke of his disillusionment with the larger political system, “It’s the whole system and the two parties’ fault. We need a whole new program up there, to respect the Constitution the way it was written.”

Another striker and 18-year AFSCME member, John, echoed this sentiment, saying that “the Democrats and the Republicans, basically they’ve pretty much sold us out. They’re not really doing a good job for any of us out in Washington. They’ve pretty much failed the people; they all pretty much became the same. They don’t have our best interest in mind.”

John also expressed his frustration with the union at not being able to secure raises for the workers in nine out of his 18 years at UCSD, with workers going stretches of three to four years with no raises.

Despite their anger, John and others were confident

that the strike would result in some type of positive gain for the workers because of the pressure it put on the UC board and the politicians.

Another striking worker, Shannon, a 20-year member of the AFSCME, expressed the belief the strike would be successful based on the fact that the workers were an invaluable part of the university. He explained that not only were service workers loyal and hard-working, they also formed a de facto security force, ensuring that equipment and materials in classrooms and offices remained safe. Therefore the UC couldn’t afford to replace them with temporary workers.

WSWS reporters also spoke with the union organizer on the UCSD campus, Matias Marin. In light of the workers’ belief that the strike action would apply immense pressure on the Board of Regents and the California Democratic Party and that their demands would be met, Marin contradicted these sentiments. “I think we have to do what we’re dealt with. It’s obvious that the service workers are replaceable.” Indeed, he asserted that a prolonged strike was not possible because the service workers could be replaced, justifying the union’s stalling and half-hearted efforts.

Striking AFSCME members should have no illusions that their leadership is capable of leading the kind of struggle necessary to win their modest demands.



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