

University of Pittsburgh: Striking Cafeteria workers ordered back to work by SEIU

Patrick Zimmerman
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Striking Cafeteria workers at the University of Pittsburgh were ordered back to work by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) on Wednesday, just two days after going out on strike against Sodexo.

The cafeteria workers, represented by the SEIU, went on strike Monday following failed contract negotiations with Sodexo, one of the largest food services firms in the world. The company is contracted by the Pennsylvania university to operate all of its campus cafeterias.

Workers are angry over low pay and the increased cost of health care. Workers start at \$8.50 an hour and the top pay is \$12 or \$13 an hour, well below what is needed to support workers and their families.

Sodexo is also forcing employees to pay more for health insurance. Workers will have to pay half of the 20 percent increase in health insurance costs. Already most employees don't have health insurance because they cannot afford the weekly premiums of \$200 to \$300 for a family.

The SEIU ordered workers to return to work unconditionally Wednesday morning after Dan Onorato, the current chief executive of the Allegheny County, promised to help with negotiations.

Onorato, a Democrat, is in the running for governor of Pennsylvania later this year. Onorato has a long record of attacking workers. Earlier this year, he collaborated in the closing of Braddock Hospital, which served one of the county's most impoverished areas.

Onorato has also spearheaded attacks on transit workers by the Port Authority of Allegheny County. In 2008, he forced through demands for cuts in workers' wages, benefits and pensions along with job and service cuts after withholding \$27 million in county funds

earmarked for the transit system. Last year, Onorato helped push through a reorganization of the transit system that led to service cuts.

The unconditional return to work imposed on University of Pittsburgh cafeteria workers marks another betrayal by the SEIU. In 2008, the SEIU made secret agreements with two large employer groups at the university, Sodexo and Compass Group USA, which gave up the workers' right to strike and picket at areas not designated by the employers. In exchange for these large concessions in workers' rights, the union received a non-interference agreement at select work locations.

Following this, the union abandoned many workers at different sites, drawing criticisms from student groups working with the SEIU on university campuses.

A letter from groups at four universities from across the nation expressed a sense of betrayal by the union: "It is becoming increasingly clear that SEIU leaders often see students and campus workers as little more than pawns to use as they see fit. SEIU has sought to maneuver these pawns in a way that brings new members and dues into the union in the short term but keeps workers in poverty and actually hurts our collective efforts to help unions grow at a massive scale."

On top of these previous betrayals, the SEIU waited until the last week of the University of Pittsburgh's semester to call the strike. Next week most of the staff will be laid off as they are not needed for the summer, and Sodexo will no longer need the workers until that fall semester starts in late August. These actions have effectively ensured the failure of the strike.

The SEIU only represents workers in two of the university's dining locations, although all locations are operated by Sodexo. The rest of the facilities are either

represented by different unions, or have no union.

Some workers have experienced trouble due to this fragmentation of representation as different unions divide workers in search of additional dues.

One worker, Mark Muray, has been working at the university for four years. “I had to leave one of the locations represented by a different union because there weren’t enough hours,” he said. “When I came here [a location represented by the SEIU], I had to start all over at the base pay.”

Mark also expressed concern about the increasing cost of health care for the workers. “Costs can be from \$200 to \$300 a week for a family. We already make so little, that is half of some people’s pay here.”

Other workers on strike also complained about the rising cost of already expensive health care.

Sharon, who has worked for Sodexo for nine years, noted that rates started increasing even faster since they began purchasing insurance from the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center (UPMC). “We aren’t asking for much, we just want to be able to make a living.”

She added, “We get laid off in the summer and have to pay for health insurance with unemployment checks. This year the cost went up 10 percent from last year.”



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