

Building, food service workers strike University of Illinois

Marcus Day
12 March 2013

Over the weekend 770 building and food service workers at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) voted down a contract proposal put forth by the school administration and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). A strike began at midnight March 11 over wages, outsourcing, and employee discipline procedures.

The union has limited the strike to three days, relegating the action to little more than a protest and ensuring it will not have any significant impact on the university's operations, while the SEIU continues negotiations. SEIU Local 73 spokesman Adam Rosen said the strike "is the way to show the university how important the workers are to the university's daily life."

Furthermore, by not calling out any other section of university staff, grad workers, or students, nor even asking them to honor picket lines, union officials are attempting to prevent a broader movement among workers and youth in the area from being sparked—even though there exists widespread opposition to the increasingly aggressive attacks on public education and workers' living standards being spearheaded by the Democratic-controlled state government.

Service workers at UIUC have been in negotiations since May of last year and have been working without a contract since July. In January this year, the workers voted by a margin of more than 91 percent to authorize a strike.

Although details of the latest contract proposal are being withheld by both the university administration and the SEIU officials, workers' deepening frustration with ultra-low wages has been at the heart of the contract dispute. Service workers, including janitors, maintenance workers, cooks and campus mail carriers, among others, are among the most exploited layers of

the university system and are often paid barely more than minimum wage. Moreover, many service workers are only contracted to work during the school year and must seek some form of temporary, and typically even more exploitative, employment during the summer. They are thus highly dependent on income earned during the school year.

Even though the University of Illinois's budget, due to tuition hikes and increased private-sector funding, has actually increased during the recession, service workers at the school have faced years of below-inflation wage increases or outright wage freezes.

In fact, the painful concessions being demanded of service workers at UIUC are completely in line with the overall program of austerity being imposed on workers and youth in Illinois, the US and throughout the world. The entire political establishment— Democrats and Republicans led by the Obama administration—is united in using the current financial crisis as a pretext for privatizing public education and related services and lower workers' living standards. In Illinois, negotiations have been going on in the state legislature for months over how best to "reform" the state's pension system—meaning, how best to reduce or remove entirely the retirement benefits workers were promised.

The unions, which operate on behalf of an upper-middle class social layer that is thoroughly hostile to workers' interests, have been wholly complicit in this process. Just two weeks ago it was announced that American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Council 31, after warning workers for weeks to prepare to go on strike, had instead reached an agreement with the administration of Democratic Governor Pat Quinn, which included huge concessions in pay and health care for state workers.

In the course of the current negotiations at UIUC,

school administrators have sought to confine workers to the university's Campus Wage Program, in which workers' wages would be set each year at the university's discretion. In other words, workers are being asked to completely forfeit their right to bargain for their compensation.

This is the same Campus Wage Program, which just over three months ago was endorsed by the graduate student workers union—the Graduate Employees Organization (GEO)—in its contract. In a statement distributed to grad workers at the time, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warned that if the GEO were successful in forcing through the proposed contract, it would “be used by the university as a benchmark to impose sweeping givebacks on other university workers currently in negotiations.”

In the contract negotiations for service workers, the university has also sought to broaden its ability to outsource maintenance and repair to outside contractors, in addition to reducing the number of paid holidays for campus mail carriers.

Among the few other details leaked about the proposed contract is the fact that it would last for three years, as opposed to the traditional two. This also is in line with the preceding contract endorsed by the GEO, which extended the grad workers' traditional three-year contract to five years. The extension of the time frame of these contracts serves the purpose of preventing strikes and binding workers to deteriorating living conditions for longer periods.

As in its last contract, the strategy of SEIU has been to attempt to defuse workers' anger by asking the university for “minimum” wage increases in the case that the Campus Wage Program stipulated wage freezes for the rest of the school's workforce. In the last contract, these minimums amounted to a miserly 1 percent increase in the first year and 1.75 percent in the second, far below inflation.

Nevertheless, SEIU senior field organizer Ricky Baldwin declared, “This was a victory for everybody on campus.” In the current negotiations, Baldwin said, “We need to know that we're at least going to get something”—even if it's far below inflation, so the implication goes.

In order to secure their interests and prevent the strike from being confined to an isolated protest “stunt” by SEIU officials, building and food service workers must

take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands. Rank-and-file committees of workers must be organized by workers themselves, independent of the union officialdom, and an appeal must be made for the independent political mobilization of workers and students throughout the university and surrounding area in defense of public education and its workers.



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