

University of Illinois building and food service workers discuss strike issues

WSWS reporting team
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Nearly 800 building and food service workers at University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) have been on strike since midnight Sunday. The workers, who include janitors, cooks, maintenance workers, and campus mail carriers, struck after voting to reject a contract proposal, which was brought before the membership by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) over the weekend.

Workers are opposing the demands by UIUC for concessions in wages, outsourcing, and employee discipline procedures. The SEIU, however, has limited the strike to three days, while warning picketers they could face fines from campus police if strikers blocked traffic in and out of school facilities.

Although strikers stated that some other campus workers, such as those in the building trades, have been honoring picket lines, the university has sought to maintain operations with temporary workers, managerial staff and academic hourly and student workers performing custodial work and food preparation.

On Monday and Tuesday, a reporting team for the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with workers on several picket lines. Strikers expressed both a pride in the critical work they perform for the university and disgust with the university's demeaning proposals. Many of the older workers, who have been working at the university for 10 or 20 years or more, noted their living standards have been declining throughout that time.

John W., a building service worker who has been at the university two-and-a-half years, said, "It's not easy for anyone. I have a pregnant wife to take care of. This contract would put us in a hard place."

Asked about the proposed extension of the contract term from two years to three, John said, "If we do a

multiyear contract, we don't know what we're going to get for health care and pensions. And they [the university] do not want to deal with the possibility of a strike. It's hard on families. This university wouldn't be able to run without us, if we weren't cleaning up after students in the dorms."

Asked about the strike being limited to three days, John responded, "I can't believe that. I don't know where it comes from. It's not beneficial to us. The work will just pile up for three days, and when we come back, we'll have to take care of it."

Matt has been working at the school for a year and Tyrece for six months. Matt said, "We do janitorial work, finishing floors, cleaning out offices. What they're offering is a minimum. My dad's been here 23 years, so I know the ins and outs of the process. They're playing with us. They want to give us just a dollar [raise] over three years, and it isn't enough."

He continued, "They want to give us something small in the first year and screw us in the last couple years."

Tyrece added, "I think its crap. Administrators are getting 10, 20 percent raises, and they want to give us two percent?"

"If you look at our job duties, we should get paid what we deserve. I just don't think it's fair, when you've got to fight for a portion of inflation. We try to live off this. It makes it hard to raise a family."

Joshua, who has been working at UIUC for four years, said, "We work at Housing Food Stores. We do a lot of the catering for campus, for the [football] stadium, the hotel, assembly hall, Illini Union [the main student center]. Our customers are the students we serve at this university. We are the ones that provide clean and healthy study and living spaces for them. We are the ones that provide safe and well-cooked meals.

"We feel as though the administration is unwilling to

discuss any of our concerns. We're seeing less money year after year. We feel as though everything is increasing with what they deduct. Where will it all end?"

Several other workers noted the likelihood that their health insurance co-pays would double or even triple over the next few years.

In addition to wages and benefits, grievances are one of the major issues in the strike. "There are literally so many which sit there and nothing gets done about them. We feel like they just don't care."

Asked about Democratic Governor Pat Quinn's pension "reform" proposals, which will undermine pension protections, Joshua said, "It's scary. You think you're making a good life decision when you take a job like this. You feel as though you can take solace in the fact that you're going to have a pension, and then you find out the money isn't there? If my retirement runs out after five years, and I live 10-20 years after that, what am I supposed to do?"

Delwin, who has worked at the university for four years, said of the strike, "We're here for the students. When I'm working, students will come up to me and say 'thank you,' I appreciate it. The disrespect we have received from this administration over the past few years—despite all the hard work we do for the students to make it clean and safe for them—that's what this strike is about. We've got to deal with bed bugs, roaches. When we go home, we have to put all our clothes in the dryer just to make sure we don't bring any bed bugs in, for our own safety.

"We are not going to accept a contract that gives us less, takes away what we have now. We're the low men on the totem pole. It's a fight for your rights."



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