

California hospital workers vote overwhelmingly to strike

A reporting team
14 May 2013

Last week, 13,000 patient care workers at five University of California (UC) Medical Centers voted by a 97 percent margin in favor of a strike against terms of a new austerity contract. On May 10, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) filed a 10-day strike notice to the UC Office of the President.

The contract proposal that the AFSCME members rejected included increased contributions towards pensions, and decreased eligibility of retiree health benefits. The vote followed a spate of hundreds of layoffs, transfers and elimination of unfilled positions by UC management.

On the same day that the strike notice was filed, UC announced that it will seek a restraining order against the strike, which is planned for May 21-22.

Recent press reports of understaffing and substandard patient care have been rampant, including a much-publicized “F” safety report card for UCLA (Los Angeles) Ronald Reagan Medical Center given by a nonprofit Leapfrog Group. According to workers, measures taken by UC management to boost its profits have come at the expense of overall patient care and safety. Under the guise of efficiency, short staffing and overbooking of surgery rooms have become common practice. So-called “VIP” priority procedures have been established to create a two-tier level of health services.

Nonetheless, hospital management is seeking to blame workers for threatening patient safety. The union’s 10-day strike warning offers ample time for the university to prepare the use of strikebreakers. If management is able to obtain a court injunction against the strike, it is highly likely that the union will obey it without question.

The overwhelming vote for strike action represents a

growing opposition to the social assault on all workers being carried out by the financial elite.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with hospital workers at the UCLA (Los Angeles) Ronald Reagan Medical Center and the UCSD (San Diego) Hillcrest Medical Center about the strike.

Many explained that they were forced to work overtime at straight-time pay under threat of losing their jobs. The university adopted the term “straight overtime” to describe this exploitative measure. Workers questioned its legality, claiming that they had “never heard of such a thing before.”

Christopher is an AFSCME member in food services at the UCSD Medical Center. When asked if he felt the union represented him, he said, “I ask myself that question all the time. When it comes to real stuff there’s not a lot that they do for you. I can’t say whether or not they could do a lot to protect me from being laid off. I’m a member, I see the deduction from my paycheck, but I still do it to be on the safe side.”

When asked about layoffs and short-staffing, Christopher replied, “There’s short-staffing in the kitchen too, so we’ve been asked to work overtime. I’m going to school studying physical therapy, but because of the extra hours that they’re making me work, I have to cut down on the classes I take. I’m going to be in school for four instead of two semesters more because of this. I can’t say no when they ask me to work overtime. I feel they might fire me if I refuse. They laid off two supervisors some time ago when they turned down a request to work overtime. Even unionized workers were fired. It didn’t matter if you were union or not. So they don’t really represent all that much.”

The WSWs also spoke to Daniel, a medical technician who has been at the UCSD Medical Center

for eight years. When our reporters asked how he regarded the strike, he said, “I hope it’s a good decision. The university isn’t budging an inch.” Asked how he felt AFSCME represented him, he replied, “sometimes they do, but not all the time. Our contract is always in favor of the university. There’s a lot of strong talk from the union, but it’s the big catch-22. In the end everything is at the university’s discretion. When you need them [the union] they are not there. The union always favors the university, all techs feel the same way.”

Daniel explained how the university wanted to cut his wages. “I don’t make enough to pay rent. I have kids and I’m ashamed that I have to go to welfare begging for food stamps.” Daniel said he makes \$27 an hour and that the contract that the University is attempting to push through would reduce his wages by \$2.70 per hour. Nearly three-quarters of AFSCME’s membership fall below the federal poverty line.

Eddie is an administrative services professional and a member of the Teamsters Union at UCLA Ronald Reagan Hospital. His union has a no-strike policy and he thinks that is unfair. Eddie said he has colleagues that are afraid to take breaks and use their sick time because they think it looks bad in front of management. He knows a lot of co-workers who won’t use their sick time or vacations. They save it up. When asked his thoughts about the general state of the economy, he told the story of a cousin that is unemployed and how he feels that there is really no job security for anyone. Eddie makes less than \$35,000 per year and experiences difficulty because the cost of living is so high in Los Angeles. To afford housing, he is forced to commute to UCLA from Azusa.

Donna has worked for the UCLA Medical Center for 25 years. When asked about the reasons for the strike vote, she said that it isn’t so much an issue about pay as it is about protecting union members’ pensions. She said, “Our pensions are at risk. I’ve worked hard for 25 years and I need my whole pension. After nearly eleven months of negotiations, it seems that they are going backward in the conversation, instead of going forward.

“It’s not right. And it’s even worse that the management gives us a raise and then essentially takes it back through these cuts.” She explained that the nurses complain all the time that the cuts are risking patients lives every day.

For its part, AFSCME has a history of betraying the struggles and aspirations of its rank-and-file. Nearly five years ago, in July of 2008, AFSCME workers voted to go on strike. The University of California petitioned the Public Employment Relations Board to forestall a strike. Accordingly, the Superior Court of San Francisco issued a restraining order prohibiting the union’s strike arguing that the strike placed patients at risk. AFSCME then postponed the strike for months.

Now, as in 2008, UC medical workers are being blamed for the University’s funding cuts and austerity measures that greatly harm patients everyday. (See, “University of California’s medical workers to hold strike vote” .)

In March of this year, 300 AFSCME jobs were cut from the UCSF (San Francisco) Medical Center. The union responded saying officials did not “confer in good faith with AFSCME about workforce reductions.” AFSCME limits its objections to the job cuts only to the extent that they would have liked a seat at the table in carrying out the layoffs.

Both UC and AFSCME will insist to the very end that patient care is the root of their concerns. AFSCME claims to represent the interests of the medical staff who have overwhelmingly voted to strike, yet the union will do everything in its power to prevent the mobilization of the independent strength of the working class. With the help of the bourgeois politicians and media, AFSCME will seek to diffuse the growing militancy and discontent of workers against worsening conditions.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact