

Union limits UC Medical workers to two-day strike

Our reporters
21 May 2013

Some 13,000 patient care workers are set to strike on Tuesday and Wednesday at University of California Medical Centers across the state after voting by 97 percent to walk out. While workers are determined to fight management's attack on wages and demands for increased health and pension contributions, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees union (AFSCME) has limited workers to a two-day strike.

Workers at UC San Diego's Health Center who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* felt the union only called the action to allow workers to blow off steam at minimal cost to the university. In the meantime, they expect the union to push through the concession contract demanded by the University just as it had done in 2008.

The 10-day strike notice issued by AFSCME included a "Notice of Unconditional Return to Work." The union, it read, "hereby provides notice that striking employees will return to their positions and work their regularly scheduled hours beginning with all shifts that commence after 3:59 AM on Thursday, May 23, 2013."

A registered nurse at UC San Diego who wished to remain anonymous told the WWS, "Our union, the California Nurses Association, is watching this strike very closely since we know our contract is next up for bargaining." She acknowledged that the nurses in her union faced the same fight with the university, which is determined to slash labor costs for all medical workers.

WWS reporters explained the unions, working in tandem with the university, actively sought to isolate the strike, thus ensuring that workers do not link up their struggles and organize effectively in defense of their class interests, to which she and others agreed.

Another worker told our reporters that "a two-day strike is not going to do anything. Management knows

we'll be back." He went on to highlight the corruption of the union leaders and their representatives in the workplace: "all the AFSCME organizers who were in the know about the strike took vacation before the University caught wind. The union leaders aren't being honest and then they turn around and ask workers to strike. It's not right."

Another worker directed our reporters to an ad on the job search site Craigslist.org where the university is hiring scab workers at \$1,800 to work during the two-day strike. Through HealthSource Global Staffing, the university will fly in scab workers from all around the country and pay for their flights, meals, and hotel. HealthSource Global staffing prides itself as being the "Industry Leader in Strike Staffing." Its web site displays a map with various states color coded as being a high, medium or low strike risks. The total cost for each strikebreaker for the two days, plus a day of orientation is nearly \$3,000 each. This is more than most staff members take home in one month. Workers the WWS spoke with at UC San Diego Medical Center were outraged that so much money was being spent while they are continuously told there is no funding for their positions.

Our reporters also spoke to a trauma technician who felt the pressures of understaffing and complained about the AFSCME contract. "There's definite short-staffing which can only lead to multiple mistakes. About five months ago we started losing staff members. We had two really close calls that required CPR where we almost lost a patient, but luckily someone was able to get to them before they had died. We're just waiting for a major incident to occur."

Due to short staffing, he said, workers have to work unpaid overtime. "There's a clause in our AFSCME contract that says if management wants to take away

overtime they can. We have to clock out and then keep working until someone else can come fill the shift.” The administration is also forcing workers to take on more of the financial burden for health care coverage and is attempting to take away \$2.80/hour from employees.

The University of California has issued all workers at its medical centers a list of “Frequently Asked Questions” regarding the strike. The FAQ is simply a list of reasons why workers should not strike, alluding to the illegality of striking and threatening a loss or suspension of benefits. The university will continue to pursue the claim it has bargained “in good faith” and that it is AFSCME workers who are “using patients as bargaining chips.” This is despite UCs staff reductions, which are the true factors that jeopardize patient care.

After the two-day strike, AFSCME will no doubt claim to its members it did all it could, and bring back a concessions contract. Similarly, the CUE/Teamsters has bargained away their right to strike, as highlighted in article 20 of their contract, entitled, “No Strike Clause.”

The unions are politically aligned with the Democratic Party, including Governor Jerry Brown, who has spearheaded millions of dollars in cuts to health care, public education and social services. The slashing of labor costs by the health care giants is also in line with Obama’s health care “reform.” Functioning as appendages of management and the Democrats, the trade unions are imposing these attacks on workers in exchange for preserving the institutional interests of the well-paid functionaries who control the unions, above all the continued collection of dues.

If medical workers are to fight these attacks they need to organize themselves in rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions, and develop a common fight against the two big business parties and the for-profit health care system they defend.



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