

University of California medical workers strike

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For two days this week, May 21-22, workers at various University of California Medical Centers went on strike. Several hundred respiratory therapists, occupational therapists, nursing aids, surgical technicians, and other patient care workers, all represented by the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) marched in front of their respective centers demanding better patient care, increased staffing, and opposing attacks on wages, pensions, and medical benefits.

They were joined by many workers from the University Professional and Technical Employees Association (UPTE) union who participated in a one-day sympathy strike. In preparation, the University of California (UC) hired over a thousand scabs paying many \$1,800 to work the two days. WSWS reporters were at strikes throughout the state speaking with workers at medical centers in San Diego, Los Angeles, and San Francisco.

Just two weeks ago, 97 percent of AFSCME workers voted to go on strike, but the vast majority ended up reporting to work. UC officials reported that nearly 77 percent of union members at UC Irvine crossed the picket line, 65 percent at the UC San Francisco center and 80 percent at UC Los Angeles medical center.

The low strike turnout does not reflect a lack of will among workers to fight for their rights. Rather, it represents the very legitimate lack of confidence the workers have in their union. They are not willing to make sacrifices only to be betrayed.

In order to intentionally cripple the strike AFSCME is paying only \$70 in strike pay. With a mandatory 8 hours picketing each day to get the money, that amounts to only \$4.37 an hour, well below minimum wage. Although the union spends millions of dollars to lobby politicians, they claim they cannot offer more in

strike wages.

AFSCME knew that many of its workers would not be able to afford to strike, and the meager strike pay was insurance to the UCs that their two-day stunt would have nowhere near 97 percent of its members striking. AFSCME, every bit as much as the UC management, is fearful of an independent movement of the working class and has done everything in its power to contain health care workers' anger.

In San Diego our reporters spoke to Lucy, a clinical nursing assistant at the UC Medical Center in Hillcrest, who has been working with patients since 1999. She had been asking her co-workers "what is a two-day strike going to do? What about tomorrow, what's really going to happen?" Lucy expressed frustration and anger at the union for paying workers a paltry \$70 to strike for two days, saying, "They have 2.3 million AFSCME members who take \$29 out of our paychecks every two weeks, they have plenty of money to pay us a full wage."

Lucy made union leaders aware that she only wanted to strike for one day and had planned to go back to work for the second day because she couldn't afford to strike. Union officials told her that if she went back to work she wouldn't get the \$70. Striking workers have to sign in with union officials and picket for 8 hours each day to receive the meager amount. Lucy said that she was striking for herself and her co-workers, though she witnessed AFSCME's toothless strike in 2008.

She told her co-workers, "You are blind if you believe the union will do anything. They just tell us that they try." Some of AFSCME's highest earning officials such as Gerald McEntee, the international president, and Larry Weinberg, general council, make \$520,000 salaries, equally exorbitant as the salaries of top UC executives about which AFSCME ironically

complains.

Lucy explained to reporters the conditions health care workers face. Staff reductions of “sitters” and clinical nursing assistants have resulted in the hospital tying down confused patients so they don’t get out bed rather than having staff sit and care for them. “One patient had fallen seven times and the doctor ordered a sitter, but who runs the hospital? Not the doctors. So the hospital is having us tie them to the beds. It’s horrible.”

Lucy used to bathe patients five times a week, but now she says her work has been diverted by management and that many of the patients only receive a bath just before they are discharged so that they go home clean, but have remained filthy during their stay. Lucy added that patients need to be turned at least three times during the night, but there is rarely time, so they’re left “smelling bad and full of bed sores.”

Diane Hodapp has been a pharmacy technician for 26 years at the UCLA Ronald Reagan Medical Center. When asked her reasons for striking, Diane complained of an illegal and ever growing workload: “My shift is nine hours. I come in early. I stay late. I don’t get lunch. I don’t get breaks and they refuse to pay me time and a half for missing my breaks. I am not even paid straight time for missing my lunch break.”

Gene Law also works at the UCLA Medical Center and has been a pharmacist for 24 years. Gene is a member of UPTE who participated in a sympathy strike with AFSCME workers. “Patient care is really important to us and that is what this is all about. I think that what’s important is that the university realizes that the pharmacists are an important part of patient care and they need to be recognized and paid accordingly.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* also spoke to Lisa Livingston, a respiratory therapist for 12 years at the UCLA Medical Center. On the problems of short staffing, Lisa exclaimed, “Oh my gosh, our workloads are going up and up. In respiratory therapy, we do the ventilators, the breathing treatments, the life support. We will have patients on a ventilator to one RT. So if you have a patient that’s critical, you have four other patients that you are not seeing.”

Regarding the strike lasting only two days, Lisa said, “It should be a strike every day. That’s a good question for us to ask AFSCME, why it is only a two-day strike.”

Lynn Lesley is Lisa’s colleague, and fellow

respiratory therapist. Lynn reiterated a universal and strongly held belief among many of the striking health care workers. “I am here for the patients in that building,” she said. “I am here for the community. I am here to take care of these people who I have a relationship with. It’s not fair that I have more patients that I can handle. And what if it was your mom on life support and I don’t have enough help to take care of her properly because I have six other patients that are requiring the same amount of care?”

Between 2011 and 2012, AFSCME was the third largest labor contributor to the two big business parties, giving a total of \$11,405,502. Most of AFSCME’s political funding was funneled into the Democratic Party, although nearly \$3 million went to the Republicans. While interviewing workers on the picket line, *World Socialist Web Site* reporters highlighted the unions’ unbreakable ties to the Democratic Party, including Governor Jerry Brown, who is at the forefront of millions of dollars in cuts to health care, education, and a wide array of social services.

AFSCME wholeheartedly supports the Obama administration and perpetuates the lie of the financial elite that there is no money for wages, benefits, or social services. AFSCME will soon present an austerity contract that is in favor of the university and report with a straight face to workers that it did all it could.



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