

# University of California medical workers frustrated by union's toothless ‘Day of Action’

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On Monday July 1st, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) held a “Day of Action” at University of California medical centers. The event was a toothless follow-up to their similarly insignificant two-day strike May 21-22 (See: “University of California medical workers strike”).

In San Diego, the “Day of Action” consisted of an hour-long rally held during workers’ lunch break. The union led workers on a march around the front entrances to the hospital shouting slogans. The rallies in front of the various UC Medical Centers throughout the state brought out a mere few dozen workers at each medical center. At some medical centers such as the Los Angeles Ronald Reagan Hospital, half of those present were union officials. The event was ignored by most of the big-business media.

AFSCME has taken up a conscious fight against workers to subdue their increasing militancy and prove to the University of California that the union can control its members. In May of this year, AFSCME workers voted to strike by an overwhelming 97 percent margin. However, skepticism and lack of confidence in the union, as well as a meager \$70 strike pay for two full days of picketing, resulted in a mere 10-15 percent of members participating in the strike.

Our reporters spoke to workers at the UCLA Ronald Reagan and UCSD Hillcrest Medical Centers.

Monica at the UCLA Medical Center complained that AFSCME’s strike pay of “70 or so dollars a day is peanuts.” In order to receive the \$70, strikers were required to picket eight hours a day. Three-quarters of AFSCME’s workers earn wages below the poverty line and the union deliberately discouraged them with the

meager \$4.38/hour strike pay.

Another nurse at the Ronald Reagan Medical Center said she was disappointed by the union and felt it did not support striking workers. She told WSWs reporters, “AFSCME should have been able to pay workers more.” She complained that the price of parking, rent and overall cost of living is increasing, and “in essence there is a pay decrease going on even if workers aren’t under attack.”

At the end of the hour-long rally, AFSCME’s vice-president told the less than 10 workers present at the UCLA Medical Center that, “we have to be strong... keep reminding them [management] what their job is... we must not give up, we must fight!” These hollow pronouncements reveal AFSCME’s cynical efforts to isolate the strike and limit it to meaningless protests. Ultimately, the union is assisting the administration in carrying out its agenda of cost cutting and wage slashing.

WSWS reporters at the UCLA Medical Center witnessed an AFSCME official badger a medical worker on her lunch break for not attending the rally. When interviewed, she said that the day of action was about making AFSCME look good.

“They want you to go out to picket but they don’t understand that there are patients under your care. The real problem is that AFSCME is weak; we’ll only win if everyone goes out on strike. The CEO doesn’t feel threatened, the CEO said directly that they [AFSCME and the Medical Center workers] can make as much noise as they want to but nothing is going to change.”

She went on to describe the deteriorating patient care and working conditions. “We were told to change the linens only if they are dirty, not every day. Even if

there is a little blood on them, we're not supposed to change them, only if they are soiled. The hospital has cut back on medical supplies and workers are fighting for the quality of patient care. It's hard to go to work when you feel like you are just being ripped off and taken advantage of."

She agreed about the necessity of forming a mass organization of working people, unattached to the unions or either of the two big-business parties, capable of linking up various workers' struggles in a coordinated general strike.

Victor, a custodian, spoke with reporters at the UCSD Medical Center. "70 dollars a day is nothing. People were getting mad because they couldn't afford to go on strike." Expressing his belief that AFSCME's two-day strike or the "Day of Action" would do little to affect the outcome of the ongoing contract negotiations, he added, "I don't think AFSCME can do a whole lot. The hospital will give them [workers] what the hospital wants to give them."

Susana and Eduardo, radiology scholars visiting from Brazil at the UCSD Medical Center, agreed with reporters that there were parallels between Brazil and the United States in terms of growing social inequality and the erosion of democratic rights in both countries, especially in light of the recent revelations exposing the extensive system of NSA surveillance and wiretapping.

Susana said, "Brazil is really not so different from the US. It is understood that some topics cannot really be written on. There are lots of stories that don't get a lot of coverage or simply go unreported." Agreeing, Eduardo added, "So much for the land of the free."

AFSCME will soon present to workers a contract laden with concessions. A paltry wage increase of 1-3 percent will do nothing to offset the increasing health care costs and dwindling retirement benefits.

Workers must break with the unions. These organizations are as beholden to the University of California administration as they are to the state and the Democratic Party.

California, like the rest of the country and, in fact, the world, is undergoing a deep and sustained attack on public services, health care, living standards and democratic rights, spearheaded by both big-business parties.

Thanks to the support of AFSCME as well as the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the

California Teachers Association (CTA) to name a few, Governor Jerry Brown has been able to impose massive cuts and furloughs on workers throughout his jurisdiction, in addition to accelerating the destruction of public education and pension benefits.

Last year, AFSCME gave 8 million dollars in support of Democratic Party electoral campaigns, all the while maintaining the lie to workers that there is no money for strike pay. The union, along with the entire gamut of trade unions, functions as an appendage of the Democratic Party and it will continue to provide crucial support to the policy of wage slashing and benefit cutting to defend the interests of capitalism.



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