

University of California health care workers hold statewide strike

Norisa Diaz**22 November 2013**

On Wednesday, November 20, health care service and technical workers of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) held a one-day strike throughout California. AFSCME represents over 21,000 service and patient care workers throughout the 10 campuses of the University of California. Two weeks ago, 96 percent voted approval of a strike, though only 10 percent ended up participating in the strike, averaging around 300 workers per campus.

The action was limited to a one-day unfair labor practices strike. According to a Public Employee Relations Board complaint filed by AFSCME last September, the UC administration is accused of engaging in threats, coercion and illegal intimidation against Patient Care and Service Workers who participated in the two-day strike last May. (See: "University of California medical workers strike")

Also on that occasion, an overwhelming 97 percent of workers voted in favor of a strike, which AFSCME similarly limited to a two-day walkout. This was done to let off steam, while offering the paltry strike pay of \$70 for two days, averaging around \$4.37/hour.

As a result, only 10-15 percent of AFSCME workers struck at each campus, many claiming that they just could not afford it. In fact, the union reserves its financial means for support of the two big business parties, leaving workers out in the cold.

In 2011 alone, AFSCME gave a total of \$11,405,502 to both Democratic and Republican candidates and has already donated \$535,000 to the Democratic candidate David Alvarez in the upcoming San Diego mayoral election. This glaring contradiction will not stop AFSCME from lying to workers that there is no money for strike pay.

While the May strike was based on workers' demands for better patient care, increased staffing, and opposing attacks on wages, pensions, and medical benefits, Wednesday's strike ignored those unresolved grievances. This is not an oversight.

Obviously, the threats by UC against workers have a definite class character: use intimidation to suppress

legitimate demands and reduce wages and benefits. However, the union is using the unfair labor practices complaint in order to evade the larger issues, thereby paving the way for yet another slew of concessions to the employer on every major question.

The United Auto Workers (UAW), which represents graduate students, as well as the California Nurses Association (CNA), had also voted to participate in a "sympathy strike" at all of the campuses. The sympathy unions are exploiting has nothing to do with solidarity for other sections of the working class. On the contrary it is a tactic by the bureaucracy to ensure broader control and defusing of workers' actions.

Notwithstanding the true nature of the unions' "sympathetic" posture, positions shift quickly in the realm of political opportunism.

The CNA has been holding meetings with the UC administration regarding contract negotiations on behalf of nurses. These talks, described as "very productive contract talks" by the UC management, reveal that management never had anything to fear from this sympathy strike.

In fact, last Saturday the CNA tentatively agreed to a concessionary contract with a no-strike clause, calling off even the nominal participation in the strike and beginning the process of isolating the workers' action. The UC Health web site reported that the amount workers will have to pay towards pensions will increase to "8 percent of pay starting in January 2014 and 9 percent of pay starting in July 2014."

The trade union bureaucrats have negotiated away all of the demands of workers with the UC officials behind closed doors. This recent development confirms the utterly false character of the CNA's self-serving "militant" posturing, as the WSWS had reported earlier.

The University of California, emboldened by the CNA's concession and the low turnout on Wednesday, will continue to push a new contract to slash wages, cut pensions and other benefits, and increase health care costs.

Our reporters intervened statewide and interviewed several workers.

Jennifer has been a pharmacy technician for 11 years at the UCLA Medical Center.

"We used to have full staffing and float techs and weekend techs. We don't have that anymore. Full staffing should be at least two technicians a shift per floor. We don't have that anymore. Now there is only one, and if that person is absent, other technicians are asked to work from other floors to float to different areas. You just can't keep up with the work and you're constantly stressed. The phone doesn't stop ringing."

Terri has been a pharmacy technician for over 13 years. "They have created so many positions, but unfortunately no staff. They require that all the regular staff work those positions. I don't think it's fair. Sometimes I come in 8 a.m. and not get off until 9 p.m. or 10 p.m. that night. I am an overworked worker. They need to hire. They say there's no money but then you see all the advancements at UCLA."

When asked about the massive political contributions that AFSCME has given to the Democrats, Terri replied, "It's big business. Money runs everything. Are they really supporting their members or are they supporting big business? That's what I wonder. Money talks."

In explaining the poor turnout Terri noted, "A lot of my coworkers in the pharmacy are scared. They don't realize it's our right to strike but they feel the union is not going to back them."

Michelle has been an X-ray technician for 6 years. Commenting on the much lower turnout for this one-day strike action in contrast to last May's two day strike Michelle said, "I feel that fewer people are here today on this one-day strike. Maybe they have lost faith in the union itself because there hasn't been that much of a change. I feel it's my duty to be here today to show my support for the union to fight more for the contract I feel we deserve. In order to have more of an impact there needs to be more unity with other employees. There has to be a longer strike even though that's not what we want because of our patients."

"Many of my coworkers are upset because part of our paycheck goes to the union and they feel like the union is not really doing their job to benefit us."

Unions have for several decades ceased to function as working class organizations in any meaningful sense. Their current reactionary character is clearly exposed in the fact that many have made legally binding promises in contracts with employers that they will never strike. Last Saturday's decision by the CNA to agree to a no-strike clause is a clear example of this.

That the UAW opted to participate in a so-called sympathy strike is only possible due to the fact that the no-strike clause in their contract expired November 5. Like the Teamsters/CUE (Coalition of University Employees) who represent thousands of UC workers, the UAW and now the

CNA have signed away their right to strike.

On Tuesday November 12, in a feeble attempt to quell mounting hostility, UC President Janet Napolitano announced a proposed tuition freeze for the 2014-15 academic year as well as the allocation of \$15 million towards services for undocumented students, graduate student recruitment and post-doctoral fellowships. It is no coincidence that Napolitano has called for a tuition freeze and the allocation of funds to graduate students only days after the UAW announced its participation in the strike.

It is significant that Governor Jerry Brown and the UC Regents had handpicked Napolitano, ex-Secretary of Homeland Security, earlier this year to head the UC system. Her background in US intelligence and law enforcement were no doubt considerations in her appointment.

The Socialist Equality Party urges all workers to reject the concessions-laden contracts that will be put before them by their trade unions. Each contract will possess a glaring similarity: increases in the amount workers will pay towards pensions, health care, and phony wage increases. Most crucially, all contracts will demand that workers sign away their right to strike.

The fight for all sections of the working class, including health care workers, technicians, nurses, and graduate students, is one and the same. The trade unions, in spite of their recent cynical posturing about sympathy strikes, continue to isolate each section of the working class. A struggle to defend the interest of all workers requires not just a rejection of these contracts, but a break with the trade union bureaucracy.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact