

University of California workers vote overwhelmingly to authorize strike

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Workers at the University of California (UC) voted this past week by a 96 percent margin to authorize a five-day strike, rejecting UC management's latest offer.

The over 21,000 patient and technical workers throughout the state at ten different campuses are in the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) union. The workers face sharp attacks on pensions, wages and health care costs.

The latest proposal put forth by the UC includes a meager 1.5 percent wage increase for four years, no pay for missed breaks, cuts in retiree health care and pensions, a raise in the retirement age of new employees, as well as the elimination of sick and vacation leave to be replaced with Paid Time Off (PTO).

The wage proposal by itself amounts to a significant cut in real income, after taking into account inflation. The cuts in pensions and retiree health care costs will be even more devastating.

In a recent letter sent from UC's chief negotiator Nadine Fishel to AFSCME's lead negotiator Seth Patel on February 3, the UC offered an amended 2.5 percent wage increase with the conditional threat that "should AFSCME schedule an additional strike and force the University to begin strike preparations, the University's wage proposal shall be rescinded."

AFSCME is working deliberately to isolate workers and eventually impose a contract that accepts all the major demands of management, while subordinating workers to the Democratic Party and Governor Jerry Brown, who has presided over austerity at UC. The union has chosen to separately negotiate the contracts of its 8,300 patient care and 13,000 service workers, calling for a mere "sympathy strike" from latter, though workers in both units face identical attacks on

pensions, wages, and health care costs.

The union has acknowledged that it has already accepted management's position on about 75 percent of contract articles up for negotiations.

Our reporters spoke to Alfred and Elisa, service workers at the UC Berkeley Medical Center. Speaking on the soaring cost of living and their reasons for striking, Alfred noted, "I have a 15-year-old son I want to send to college, and if management gets what it wants I won't be able to afford that. Rent is \$1800/month and rising throughout the Bay Area, so I might have to move as well."

Elisa commented that UC's proposal "is going to be a lot of trouble, it will impact me a lot. I won't have enough money to put food on my family's table, we might have to move, and we'll probably have to cut meals some days."

When asked his opinion on what the contract should include, Alfred said, "100 percent in retirement, 100 percent in medical, yearly raises, no contracting out, and the opportunity to move up. I should get the opportunity to move up." Lisa agreed: "Better retirement, higher wages, and a better health plan."

Our reporters also spoke with workers at the UC San Diego Health Center. Justin, a contract service worker at the medical center, had previously belonged to the Sprinkler Fitters Local 669 until he lost his job in 2009.

Commenting on the high cost of health care and the false promises of the Obama administration, Justin said, "It would be nice for everyone to just be able to walk into any hospital and get treatment, like in Europe and Canada. Even if taxes are higher, it's worth it. I know lots of people that have decided paying for the penalty comes out being cheaper than Obamacare. Everybody's stoked that he's [Obama] black, as if that made any difference. They're all liars and crooks."

AFSCME recently produced a report, “Runaway Inequality at the University of California,” which highlights rising tuition costs, chronic understaffing, soaring workplace injuries, growing income inequality and poverty wages, while the take home pay of UC executives continues to skyrocket.

The report noted that since 2008 the number of UC executives making more than \$200,000 a year has shot up by 77 percent. In addition, UC has more than made up for a \$900 million budget gap in state funding with \$1.4 billion in tuition hikes.

The UC system supports 1 out of every 46 jobs in the state, totaling 430,000. Total revenues for UC have increased by 23 percent since 2008, generating \$46.3 billion in economic activity. The libraries and academic programs that were closed due to “budget cuts,” however, have not been re-opened, nor have the thousands of workers who lost their jobs been re-hired.

Since the layoffs began, AFSCME and the rest of the trade unions went along with UC’s line that the cuts were necessary and justifiable. The layoffs disproportionately impacted the lowest earners at UC.

A mass restructuring has taken place at UC, which is only one example of how the ruling class has benefited from the economic crisis it created. The victims of UC’s austerity measures include students, lecturers, researchers, service and health care workers, patients, and faculty.

Only a tiny fraction of the jobs that were lost have been replaced, and many positions are currently manned by a rotation of temporary employees. Significantly cheaper than full time staff, currently 1 in 10 service workers at UC are temporary workers who do not receive benefits and can be laid off at any time without recourse.

As employees are forced to work harder with fewer staff, job related illness and injuries have increased by 17 percent since 2009.



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