

AFSCME cancels strike, accepts concessions at University of California

Norisa Diaz
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In a major stab in the back, the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 3299 has accepted a tentative concessions contract with University of California officials, canceling the five-day strike planned to begin this week.

The union represents over 21,000 patient care technical and service workers who voted by a 96 percent margin in favor of striking. The strike planned for March 3 through 7 involved a walkout by 8,000 service workers (custodians, food workers, gardeners and others), and a sympathy strike by 13,000 patient care technical workers.

In what was a betrayal to begin with, weakening both sections of the workforce, the union chose to negotiate the contracts of the two divisions separately, and the tentative contract applies only to the service workers, who will soon vote on the contract. The 13,000 patient care technical workers, who are now on their own, will continue bargaining for a contract.

The union has not released the details of the contract agreed upon with UC officials, but it is already selling it to workers as a “victory” and a “historic tentative agreement.” Based on AFSCME’s cynical behavior, to say nothing of the recent and not-so-recent history of betrayal on the part of other unions, workers have every reason to treat these claims with skepticism and contempt.

The union’s claim that the threat of a strike by 21,000 workers forced the university to retreat is the opposite of the truth: the possibility of a struggle that might have gotten out of AFSCME’s control terrified union officials into surrendering.

Local 3299 was initially asking for four percent across-the-board yearly raises and had made loud noises that such a figure was the very least it would accept, as was agreed upon in UC’s contract with the California Nurses Association. Anything less, workers were told, would be rejected and regarded as an “unfair double standard.” Unsurprisingly, the union cannot even make good on the

little that it promised to fight for, and has reportedly accepted a tentative agreement with only three percent across-the-board increases. The previous contract contained a no-strike clause and there is little reason to suspect that the tentative agreement will differ.

Celebrating the tentative contract and strike cancellation, UC vice president of human resources, Dwaine B. Duckett said, “We worked hard to bridge gaps on the issues. Ultimately both sides chose compromise over conflict.” Duckett is only partially correct, as he knows full well, since the overwhelming majority of the concessions have come from AFSCME.

Earlier in the negotiation process, the president of the local, Kathryn Lybarger, was compelled to admit that, “All told, there were more than 40 contract articles up for negotiation between AFSCME and UC. AFSCME has already conceded to UC’s position on more than 30. That means UC has already gotten more than 75 percent of what it wants.”

According to the *Los Angeles Times*, “the [service] employees will contribute 9% of their pay for pension and retiree healthcare benefits programs, much higher than last year but the same as many other unions, according to officials.” The *Times* continues, “The AFSCME agreement achieves a major goal for new UC system President [and former Secretary of Homeland security] Janet Napolitano.”

Next on the list for AFSCME is a sell-out of the patient care technical workers, whose position has been weakened by the tentative deal with the service workers. Lybarger commented, “The Patient Care Unit has been engaged in good faith bargaining for more than 20 months—even longer than Service workers—and like Service workers, has already given UC 80 percent of what it wants, including the university’s top priority of pension reform.”

The unions are complicit in the attack on workers’

pensions as they have accepted contract provisions making workers pay more out of pocket for their pensions and health care costs.

AFSCME notes on its website that “99 percent of service workers [are] currently income eligible for some form of public assistance, and some full time UC workers [are] even living in their cars.” The new contract will do nothing to alleviate this appalling situation.

A service worker at the University of California, San Diego Medical Center and a single mother, Janet, told the WSWS, “I have benefits, but I can never afford to go to the doctor. I take my son when it’s an emergency, but aside from that, we can never go.”

Three or even four percent wage increases are totally inadequate for workers in this kind of situation, and will do nothing to raise them out of poverty and financial insecurity.

Kami, a food service worker at the UCSD medical center, spoke with our reporters both before and after the strike cancellation was announced. In our first interview, she regretfully admitted that “this is the first time I will not be going on strike, I just can’t afford it. The union is offering \$70 a day and it’s not enough. I have bills to pay. The union used to give us a full day’s wages, but now they give \$70 and no one can afford that. The people who plan on striking are going to be very upset when they see their paycheck. We pay dues. Where is our money going?”

Our reporters mentioned the importance of workers striking together since they all face similar attacks on staffing, health care and pensions. Kami agreed, “We [AFSCME] were going to go on strike, but the cashiers weren’t, because they belong to another union. That doesn’t make any sense. We need to stick together and shut this place down until we get what we want.”

One of the contract “victories” that the union is celebrating is the agreement to “layoff temps before career workers.” This is a rotten rejection of working class solidarity that pits one section of workers against another. It also accepts the basic point of view of UC management: the alleged need for layoffs and austerity.

AFSCME ritualistically invokes the slogan, “an injury to one is an injury to all,” during a lunch-hour picket. In practice, however, the contempt of the AFSCME bureaucracy for those workers not in a position to pay union dues speaks volumes about their actual views. The outlook of this well-heeled social layer has far more in common with the UC management than the rank-and-file workers it purports to represent.

All workers, union and non-union alike, face the same struggle and must understand that an attack on one section of workers is a prelude for an attack on broader sections of the working class further down the line. AFSCME, along with other unions, is opposed to such a perspective of class solidarity and moves in concert with UC management to isolate and contain workers’ struggles, all the better for management to impose its agenda on them.

Not only are the unions unable to wage a genuine fight on behalf of workers, they specialize in standing reality on its head, caving in to UC’s demands and hailing it as a “victory.” In fact, both Local 3299 and management are agreed that the UC workers must accept poverty wages and meager benefits, which AFSCME officials can then shed crocodile tears about.

As the February 11 statement of the Socialist Equality Party, distributed to UC workers, argued: “Workers can secure their rights only through an independent struggle. This first requires a break with the unions—including AFSCME ...

“The unions are dead set against a unified struggle because of their political alliance with the Democratic Party, the Obama administration and Governor Jerry Brown, all of whom are leading the attack on the working class.

“Workers must form their own independent rank-and-file organizations to wage a struggle against these agents of capital. Such struggle must be immediately extended to all other layers of the working population across the country and worldwide, in full solidarity for the defense of workers’ jobs, living standards and democratic rights.”

The author also recommends:

Unite the working class behind University of California workers!

Statement of the Socialist Equality Party (US)
[11 February 2014]



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