

AFSCME cancels University of California strike

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After canceling the strike planned three weeks ago for service workers and accepting a concessions contract, the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 3299, has just accepted a tentative agreement calling off a second strike. Following a 96 percent strike vote, 13,000 patient care workers were to begin a five-day strike Monday, March 24.

AFSCME bargains for over 21,000 service and patient care workers at ten UC campuses, five medical centers, and numerous clinics and research laboratories throughout California. After accepting the concessions contract for its 8,000 service workers just weeks ago, which include food service, groundskeepers, and janitorial staff, and canceling the March 3-7 strike, AFSCME has carried out a similar maneuver with the patient care workers.

The latest so-called “victory” contract gives the UC administration its top priority of pension reform, which amounts to workers having to pay 2.5 percent more out of pocket into their pensions—in effect, a cut in real wages.

AFSCME president Kathryn Lybarger claimed, “This proposed agreement reflects compromise on both sides, improves safety in UC Hospitals, and honors the important contributions that Patient Care Technical Workers make to the UC Health system every day.” The only concessions that have been made are those by AFSCME, at the expense of its own members.

AFSCME has been negotiating with UC since their contract expired in September of 2012. It deliberately split the two groups of workers, settling first one contract, then the other, each time issuing fake-militant threats of strike which were quickly rescinded amid claims of “victory.”

This conduct prevents a joint struggle by different

sections of the workers, allowing UC to pick off one section at the time while at the same time providing a cover for the union.

These events have occurred within weeks of each other, strongly suggesting that these were in fact premeditated to divide workers from joint action against UC.

It has been reported that 75 percent of AFSCME’s members at UC live in poverty. AFSCME initially said it would not accept across the board wage increases that were less than 4 percent for its service workers, which is what UC bargained with the California Nurses Association (CNA), claiming that anything less would be “second class” treatment of AFSCME workers. Despite this empty rhetoric, the union accepted a contract for service workers that included a 3 percent across the board increase, as well as cuts to workers’ pensions and an increase in the amount they must pay in out-of-pocket health care costs.

AFSCME has openly admitted 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 union has not explained why it negotiated these poverty wages.

The union is both unable to and uninterested in carrying out a fight for a living wage for its workers. Its loyalty remains to the Democratic Party and the administrations of Gov. Jerry Brown and President Obama, who are waging an open assault on the jobs, living standards and conditions of life of workers.

In what amounts to a flamboyant violation of the most elementary principle of working class solidarity, AFSCME celebrated their agreement with UC to “lay off temps before career workers” as a “victory” for the service workers. Over time, the union has allowed for the increased numbers of temporary and per diem

workers, accepting management's line that austerity and layoffs are necessary, while haggling over the correct order in which they should be carried out.

The union is not opposed to layoffs, so long as temporary, per diem, and contract workers are the first to be let go. Their recent "PCT Victory!" statement includes the following:

- "For indefinite layoffs, UC must lay off registry, travelers, and per diems before career workers (unless UC has a narrow, bonafide business need to keep a per diem).

- Grievance rights if UC doesn't follow inverse seniority for indefinite layoffs.

- Additional alternatives to layoffs, and rights for laid off employees."

Today, one in ten UC workers are temporary. According to the American Staffing Association, the temp industry added more jobs in the last three years than any other sector. Indeed, many current temporary workers in the UC system are former union workers who had been laid off as a direct result of budget cuts unchallenged in any serious way by the unions.



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