

University of California doctors strike

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16 April 2015

Doctors at University of California (UC) student health centers went on strike last week for the second time in three months. Last January a one-day strike marked the first walkout by the university's licensed physicians in a quarter of a century.

The Union of American Physicians and Dentists (UAPD), affiliated to the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), organized the strike by the unionized doctors. As in January, the union limited the scope of the action to unfair labor practices, although physicians have raised crucial issues, such as understaffing, underfunding, clinician retention, patients overflow and wages.

The UAPD has been bargaining with the UC administration for a first contract for more than a year. Their principal grievance is over UC's denial to release financial information, which the union seeks to utilize in the negotiation.

Student health centers on UC campuses serve nearly 240,000 students, mainly in the identification and curtailing of potential disease outbreaks. In recent weeks, these doctors promptly responded to a meningitis outbreak at UC Santa Barbara and 40 mumps cases at UC Berkeley.

Moreover, the centers provide crucial mental health support to a growing number of youth displaying mental illnesses and conditions such as depression, anxiety, behavioral and eating disorders, sexual abuse, domestic violence, substance abuse, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia.

A report by two UC medical professionals last September documented a 37 percent increase in the number of UC students using counseling and psychological services from 2006 to 2013. In reality, short staffing is the norm, with cases, like UC Santa Cruz, where no psychiatrist is on staff.

These vital services have been compromised by repeated budget cuts. UC receives \$460 million less in state funding than it did in 2007–08, while tuition fees for students continue to increase.

There is widespread support among students and workers for the strike. However, doctors and their supporters must consciously confront the obstacles ahead.

First, the State of California, presided over by Governor Jerry Brown and mirroring the federal government, will continue its attacks on social programs. The UC Regents will inevitably continue to abide by Sacramento's executive orders. Despite Brown bragging of unprecedented budget surpluses, health care and education, among others, have seen no restoration of funds cut in the years since the 2008 financial crisis.

On the contrary, the trend continues and is now affecting a layer of traditionally well-paid professionals, a clear sign of the increasing depth of the crisis and the determination of the state to transfer costs onto workers.

Secondly, the UAPD is conducting another toothless strike. In addition to a limited grievance, duplicating January's one-day action, the recent strike was planned to ensure it would pose no threat to the UC administration. While Northern California campuses conducted the strike April 9-13, Southern California followed a different schedule, April 11-15. The days in common coincided with the weekend to minimize the impact of the strike. In addition, health centers remained open during the strike, according to the *Los Angeles Times*.

Moreover, this strike is occurring at a time when multiple sections of the working class worldwide are coming into sharp struggle against their employers: in the US alone in recent weeks, oil workers, dock workers, nurses and, more locally, Los Angeles city workers have all engaged in some form of industrial action, only to be isolated and betrayed by their unions, instead of being organized in united action nationally and internationally.

More specifically, AFSCME, to which UAPD is affiliated, canceled a strike last year that threatened to unite two sections of UC workers: service workers and patient care technicians. Significantly, AFSCME is also responsible for signing onto Detroit's bankruptcy plan, which effectively imposed unprecedented cuts to city workers' jobs, pensions and health benefits.

AFSCME and the other unions are politically allied to the Brown administration and President Obama who is spearheading the bipartisan attack on health care, including cost-cutting measures against health care workers and the shifting of costs from employers and the government onto the backs of workers and students. For this reason, the unions do not want a serious struggle, because this could develop into a broader movement to defend health care and other social rights against the Obama administration.

The WSWs interviewed some of the workers and students who participated in the UC Los Angeles rally.

Doctor Mark Ackerman, an internist, complained about the first contract not being finalized after 15 months of struggle. He emphasized the problem of understaffing, as well as funding and clinician retention. "Mental health services are particularly hit with [patient] overflow, folks who can't get in to see their mental health specialist. Many of the campuses can't even hire a psychiatrist, let alone just keep them there."

Asked about the correlation between the ability to provide health services and the general health of the population, Dr. Ackerman commented, "It's a stressful time for people. To miss five days for a simple flu can set you back a tremendous amount. If you're already not doing well, it can make one more stressed. With an anxiety disorder or if depressed, or if you can't get in to be seen or you don't have the finances for even a prescription, it will exacerbate the condition."

Dr. Ackerman concluded, "Something's got to give. It's not like we're dealing with things that don't matter. We're talking about the health and wellbeing of people in their formative years when they're spending a lot to go through school. It seems the deck has been stacked more negatively against them."

A student who asked to speak on stage wished to thank one of the doctors who "literally saved my life." She told how four years ago she fell victim to anxiety and depression. The WSWs later interviewed her.

Suzanne Dakkak said, "As women, we're pressured to be skinny, beautiful, and I wish there were more things to help women with their self-confidence. I don't know where the trigger happened, but I became so stressed with school. It was so much different from high school. Anxiety made me not want to eat, and I lost a lot of weight. With such a negative stigma over mental health, I felt I couldn't tell anyone. If CAPS [Counseling And Psychology Services] wasn't there, I don't know what would have happened to me."

Two workers also supporting the strike spoke to the WSWs. Ricardo Lopez, a patient transport technician at Ronald Reagan Medical Center, drew a connection between the doctors' struggle and student tuition. "It's crazy to charge students even more. We know there's funding, but they are not providing any. This is a learning center and they are teaching students to be greedy. What can we expect for the future? It's all about profit."

"We're considered lower end workers: cleaning houses, moving patients. Here doctors are on the picket line, that's big. The UC executives are pocketing the money."

Alton Williams, an environmental service worker at Ronald Reagan, added, "The University administrators are experts at finding loopholes to pocket money instead of using it for useful services."

Sam, a teaching assistant, also spoke in support of the strike. "The doctors' struggle mirrors the struggle of teaching assistants. There's an increase of patients and they don't have sufficient time for all. Our situation is similar. In 2007 we used to have 15 students in our discussion sessions, now there are 25." Asked about what the cause of this might be, Sam said, "underfunding and a climate of hostility toward workers. It's also happening to service staff. It's an intensification of labor requirements, which is pushing workers into struggle. It's about the enrichment of people at the top at the expense of everyone else, students and workers."



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