

University of California support staff in one-day strike

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Some 12,000 administrative, support and clerical workers throughout the University of California system are set to take part in a one-day strike today. The strike affects all 10 University of California campuses, located in major cities throughout the state, as well as five medical centers.

Teamsters Local 2010 said it called the one-day “sympathy” strike to support the nearly 600 skilled trade workers (electricians, mechanics, plumbers, locksmiths), who are currently on a one-week strike at UC Los Angeles that began Friday January 6 and has been scheduled to end Wednesday. Their contract expired in 2013. Skilled trades workers at UC San Diego saw their contract expire in 2015.

The Teamsters said the strike was in response to “unfair labor practices (ULP’s),” violations of state laws, and UC’s refusal to “bargain in good faith.” While from the standpoint of the Teamster executives the strike represents an attempt to diffuse worker anger over declining living standards, it nonetheless expresses the determination of workers to fight back after years of concession contracts. The Teamsters local 2010 contract expired November 30, 2016.

In a self indictment of its own policies the union notes that real wages have decreased by 24 percent over the past 18 years “while executive pay skyrockets, tuition increases, and the University grows ever wealthier.”

A study released in October of last year by Occidental College’s Urban & Environmental Policy Institute in conjunction with Teamsters Local 2010 concluded that over two-thirds or “70% of UC’s clerical, administrative, and support workers struggle to put adequate food on the table,” a category the U.S. Department of Agriculture defines as “food insecure.”

Despite UC’s reputation of providing “good jobs,”

the vast majority of its administrative staff must make monthly decisions on whether they should pay for adequate food or bills, while 45 percent report that they often skip meals to avoid the expense.

The report also found that employees with children suffer from food insecurity at even higher levels. Staff with children reported 77.9 percent insecurity and those headed by a single mother 88.8 percent, or a single man, 91.7 percent.

It is difficult to determine the degree to which food insecurity effects mental and physical states, but at least 69 percent reporting having difficulty concentrating on work due to inadequate meals at least once a year, with 14.2 percent reporting they experienced this hardship monthly.

University of California is the state’s third largest employer, and the largest public institution of higher learning in the United States.

The numbers reveal the vast polarization of wealth in the country’s richest state, and, if it was a separate country, the sixth largest economy in the world. Despite its immense wealth, the state has the highest poverty rate in the US according to a report published by the Center for Continuing Study of the California Economy last July. Nearly half of California’s children live at or below the poverty line.

The same report cited the “Student Food Access and Security Study” published in July 2016 which found that 42% of UC students were food insecure, with 29% reporting that they had difficulty studying due to hunger caused by lack of money for food.

UC President Janet Napolitano replied to the revelations by pledging an increase of a derisory \$3.3 million funding to improve food access. However, Napolitano’s plan involved no decrease in tuition, campus housing or books, but rather assistance in

enrolling students into the state's food stamp or CalFresh program, pressuring better-off students to donate "meal points" in the Swipe Out Hunger programs, and increasing the student debt limit.

The decision by the Teamsters to limit the strike to one day is a clear attempt to diffuse worker anger while minimizing the impact on management. Instead of seeking to mobilize all UC employees in a common struggle, they are keeping separate groups of workers isolated so that management can defeat them one by one.

This is in line with the policies pursued by the Teamsters nationally. The Teamsters' Central States Pension Fund collaborated with the Obama administration as it sought to slash the pensions for retired drivers. The CSPF sent letters to 400,000 pensioners in October 2015 stating that they would see their benefits drastically cut, many by as much as 50 percent or more under proposed changes aimed at "saving" the fund from bankruptcy.

While verbally opposing the Multiemployer Pension Reform Act of 2014 signed into law by Obama, the Teamsters and AFL-CIO joined by the Service Employees International Union and North American Building Trades Unions are pledged to carrying out devastating cuts to pensioners and their families after decades in which they collaborated with employers to undermine worker retirement plans.

All the contracts currently under negotiation seek to raise the proportion that workers must contribute to their own retirement. Increased contributions to retirement costs by employees quickly undermine any supposed raises. The last UC contract in 2011 contained a 1.5 percent increase in employee pension contributions and created a tiered system under which workers hired after July 1, 2013 had to contribute 7 percent.

The only way forward for the clerical and administrative staff throughout the UC system is to fight for an expansion of their struggle throughout the entire UC system, bringing in nurses, housekeepers, electricians, kitchen staff and students. It must be organized independently, outside of the framework of the unions that do the bidding of the Democratic Party and management.

The Occidental College study published comments by UC employees that reflect the hardships they face. One

worker stated, "I get depressed and truly feel like my life is worthless for not being able to pay my bills and buy enough groceries. I feel like I am failing in my life because I am always broke. I eat ramen noodles for lunch everyday, just to make sure that I am not spending money to feed myself. I am sad about this and I feel so disappointed that I have worked here for 16 years and don't make enough to survive and live life comfortable without worry. I am continually crying.

"It is terrible that every month I have to ask for assistance at food banks, from family members, friends and churches. I am horribly embarrassed.

"Every month I have to make a tough decision: do I pay the water bill or PG&E bill or not? I can only afford to eat one meal per day (I have to skip breakfast and lunch) and I'll be honest—a bag of microwave popcorn does not make for a healthy meal.

"We buy meat from the soon-to-expire discount bin at the grocery store and some days we just don't really eat dinner.

"It brings me to tears answering these questions and realizing how often my husband and I go without so that our children have enough food to eat every month. I work very hard every day and go above and beyond my job description but yet I don't earn enough to live!"



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