

Low turnout for University of California workers' one-day strike

Our reporters
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Teamsters Local 2010, which represents over 12,000 University of California (UC) administrative, support, and clerical staff, staged a one-day strike Tuesday. Despite the union's large official membership, turnout for the strike was reportedly only 10 to 13 percent throughout the ten UC Campuses and three medical centers across the state.

The strike was called by union officials to protest "Unfair Labor Practices" and to encourage university administrators to "bargain in good faith," and sought to put pressure on UC to increase wages during contract negotiations which have been underway since April. The contract for administrative staff expired November 30, 2016.

The low turnout for yesterday's strike does not reflect the acquiescence or apathy of UC workers, but rather the inability of the Teamsters to win over clerical workers throughout the UC system, who have seen their wages decline by over 24% in the past eighteen years.

It was reported only last fall that nearly two-thirds of UC workers struggle every month to decide between purchasing adequate food or paying rent and bills. A study conducted by Occidental College's Urban & Environmental Policy Institute last October found that "70% of UC's clerical, administrative, and clerical workers struggle to put adequate food on the table," a category the U.S. Department of Agriculture defines as "food insecure."

Similarly, just four years ago 97% of the 21,000 service workers (custodians, food workers, gardeners, and housekeeping staff) represented by the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) voted overwhelmingly to strike in order to combat their increasing poverty. The union itself noted 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 fight of service workers was then strangled, when the union limited the strike to a mere two days, contained the strike to only 8,000 of its members, preventing 13,000 patient care and technical workers from participating, and offered only \$45 per day to account for lost wages during the strike. Despite workers' desire to fight for better wages and working conditions, only 10 to 15 percent of the membership participated in the 2013 strike.

WSWS reporters spoke to striking workers at the UC San Diego (UCSD) Medical Center in the Hillcrest neighborhood. They reported a 12 percent total participation in San Diego, with an estimated 170 out of 1400 employees represented by the union present. Some picketers also reported that there were those who did not show up for work, but were not on the picket line.

Raquel, who works in a laboratory on campus, explained that impoverished UC workers and students confronted similar conditions. "Even UCSD education is expensive, the students have part time jobs to supplement eating expenses. The one thing you shouldn't have to worry about while going to school is having to feed yourself," she noted.

"That's why we're out here for fair wages. It's the same for us. It's like we're treading water continuously and we're not getting anywhere. I know people who have to work part-time jobs in addition to their full-time job. You have to change your lifestyle to work here."

Additionally, despite their inability to adequately feed themselves and their families, workers throughout the UC System pay exorbitant costs for parking. "In La

Jolla, you have to pay \$100 a month for parking,” Raquel reported.

Another worker explained the impact of high parking costs, “It’s a drop in the ocean for people like the chancellor making well over \$100,000 a year but for us it’s different. It cuts into our paychecks in a serious way.”

Raquel also noted the extreme levels of inequality at UC, “They give \$200,000 to the CEO’s and CFO’s and we get zero.” A report released by AFSCME in 2014, noted that top executives with salaries of “\$200,000 in base pay have skyrocketed by 77% since 2008, swelling payroll costs by an additional \$286 million for less than 2,000 individuals.”

Another clerical worker, Sandra, spoke on the limited wage increases over the years, which have not kept up with inflation. Sandra said she was hired in 2002 at a pay rate of \$13 an hour. “It’s 2017, I’m in the same position. Still classified as entry level, A-1, and I have the same rate. I’m only \$2 more an hour than 15 years ago. Up until 7 months ago I was on EBT (food stamps). I take the bus now, it’s more economical.”

Andrew told the WSWs, “I’ve been here for 14 years. I started at \$12.50 an hour and I’m \$14 an hour now. I’m forced to live with my son and his fiancé. We need our cost of living it’s terrible.”

Raquel mentioned how workers are classified as part-time and are not eligible for benefits while still working them full-time, “I’ve known people in the kitchen who work part-time for 20 years and are still not receiving benefits.”

George expressed concerns over the election of Trump and responded positively when reporters mentioned the dead-end of the two-party system. He said, “I’m scared. So many things he said most people don’t agree with. Even the people who voted for him don’t agree with them. It’s hard to imagine how it came to two candidates that were so horrible.”

The impoverished conditions faced by UC workers run contrary to the myth of the “apathetic” American working class. In both struggles cited, low turnout rates reflect the fact that workers did not feel supported or represented by their union, despite a genuine desire to fight.

UC has gloated that the majority of Teamsters employees showed up for work yesterday and likely feel emboldened to increase their attack on workers and

pursue meager wage increases of 12 to 18 percent over six years. These proposals are totally inadequate to raise staff out of such conditions, do not even keep up with inflation, and in all likelihood only cover increases in pension and healthcare contributions.

Beholden to the Democratic Party, most immediately represented by UC President Janet Napolitano, the ex-chief of Homeland Security under Obama and the former Democratic Governor of Arizona, the Teamsters offer no way forward in a genuine fight for a living wage or to combat repeated increases in healthcare or pension contributions.

The only way forward for UC workers is to organize independently, outside of the stranglehold of the Democratic Party and the trade unions, to build democratic rank and file committees uniting the struggles of nurses, patient care staff, food service workers, skilled trades and students.



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