

53,000 workers begin three-day strike at California universities and hospitals

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7 May 2018

Nearly 53,000 healthcare, technical, service and research workers represented by the American Federation of State and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) across 10 University of California (UC) campuses are beginning a three-day strike today, which is scheduled to conclude on Wednesday. Nurses represented by the California Nurses Association (CNA) and health care administrators represented by the University Professional and Technical Employees (UPTE) union will join them Tuesday and Wednesday in a sympathy strike.

In mid-April AFSCME-represented workers voted overwhelmingly in favor of a strike, rejecting the UC's last offer of 3 percent yearly wage increases and a prorated, lump-sum payment of \$750. The union is demanding a 6 percent yearly increase, a freeze on health-care premiums, and the elimination of contracting out positions.

AFSCME is the UC's largest employee union, representing more than 24,000 staff, who include food service, groundskeepers, and janitorial staff across 10 UC campuses, five medical centers, and numerous clinics and research laboratories throughout California.

One week after AFSCME authorized the strike vote, UC nurses throughout California voted by 98 percent to engage in a sympathy strike in solidarity with AFSCME workers on Tuesday and Wednesday. Comments on the CNA social media pages called for an expansion of the strike to other sections of nurses and across the country with comments that "Kaiser nurses should stand with them" and "Florida needs to follow."

The UPTE, an affiliate of the Communication Workers of America (CWA), announced a sympathy strike following the CNA vote and urged its membership to remain within the limited framework.

"Unlike the Service Unit, UPTE is still bargaining with UC, and is not yet at impasse. UPTE is not striking for the purposes of changing its own terms and conditions of employment," a union statement read. "It is very important that our members continue to work as scheduled on May 7, and not commence any strike activity until May 8."

UPTE workers on social media offered their support of AFSCME workers but inquired about the limiting of the strike to just AFSCME workers, asking, "When will UPTE strike? We should be the ones on strike not just for a fair contract but just to be brought up to a market wage! When is our Strike Vote? Why has the strike vote not been set?"

Workers throughout the UC system as well as in other sections of industry are facing similar conditions with regard to low wages, attacks on pensions and health care, and the increasing use of contracted and temporary labor to drive down wages.

In fact, the UC bargains with 14 different unions as part of a blatant attempt to divide the UC workforce, which is the largest in the state. Even AFSCME itself is comprised of four bargaining units which each have their own contracts bargained at different periods. These include: UC Service Workers (SX); UC Patient Care Technical Workers (EX); UC Santa Cruz Skilled Craft Workers (K7); and staff at the UC Hastings College of the Law.

It is critical that workers heed the lessons from the 2014 concessions contract, which was falsely hailed by AFSCME as a great victory. That contract provided the UC administration with the pension reform which was its top priority and a real cut in wages, with workers required to pay 2.5 percent more out of pocket into their pensions.

The union celebrated their agreement with UC to "lay

off temps before career workers” as a victory for the service workers, showing their claims of “solidarity” to be lies when it comes to the hyper-exploited workforce.

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 contract being negotiated will not change this reality.

In 2014, 97 percent of union members voted to strike but only 15 to 20 percent participated upon learning the union would only pay strikers a meager \$70 a day in strike pay and the union is counting on similar outcomes. Jose, a custodian at the UC San Diego Jacobs Medical Center, told the WSWs that he had struck in 2014, but the \$70 a day once again being offered to striking workers would not be enough to pay his rent and he had lost faith that the union would negotiate a living wage.

As four years ago, UC administrators will work with the unions to shut down the strike and prevent it from spreading to other layers of workers and students on the campuses and beyond. The union negotiators will give of an appearance of militancy even as they prepare a betrayal behind closed doors. From the beginning the unions have accepted the line that austerity and layoffs are necessary, while haggling over the correct order in which they should be carried out.

UC workers should not forget that AFSCME president Kathryn Lybarger exalted the 2014 concessions contract, stating, “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 contracts being prepared will further attack pensions, with the UC seeking to increase the amount workers pay out of pocket and establish a 401k-style pension for new hires rather than the traditional pension plan.

UC workers must organize rank-and-file committees in order to take control of the strike and wage an independent struggle outside the stranglehold of AFSCME, the CNA and UPTE-CWA, which are all loyal to the Democratic Party, which has been waging an open assault on the jobs and living conditions across the state of California.



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