

Sympathy strike expands University of California picket lines

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Nurses in the California Nurses Association (CNA) and health care admins in the University Professional (UPTE) union joined the 24,000 members of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 3299 in a statewide strike across ten University of California (UC) campuses, five medical centers, and numerous clinics and research laboratories on Tuesday.

Thousands of health care service and technical workers, including food service, groundskeepers, and janitorial staff began their three-day strike on Monday and have been joined by nurses and administrative workers for a two-day sympathy strike through today, ballooning the number of UC workers on strike across California to nearly 53,000.

In mid-April 97 percent of AFSCME's members voted to strike and rejected the UC's insulting last offer of a 3 percent yearly wage increases and a prorated, lump-sum payment of \$750. Workers are demanding a 6 percent yearly increase, a freeze on health care premiums, and the elimination of the practice of contracting out positions, which drives down wages and put patients and employees at risk.

One week after the AFSCME strike vote, 98 percent of UC nurses voted to engage in a sympathy strike in solidarity with the service workers. Workers throughout the UC system confront the same problems as workers throughout the country with regard to meager wages, attacks on pensions and health care, and the increasing use of contracted and temporary labor.

As with the teachers' strikes in Arizona, Oklahoma, and West Virginia, the move for a strike has come from the rank-and-file UC workers while the unions have sought to limit the strike to just three days and isolate the strike from other sections of the working class.

UC workers should not forget that their current

contract, which has done nothing to keep pace with the rising cost of living and increases to out-of-pocket pension costs, was proclaimed a victory by AFSCME in 2014. The contract being prepared will further attack pensions as UC attempts to rid itself of its retirement obligations and push a 401k-style pension on new hires.

Metropolitan areas in California that are the home of UC campuses have some of the highest costs of living in the US, including Berkeley, San Francisco, Santa Barbara, Los Angeles, and San Diego.

Linda, a patient biller with 24 years' experience at UC-San Diego (UCSD) told the WSWs, "The cost of living is very high, and we just want UCSD to keep up with that. You have people working extra hours, more than 8 hours a day, and you are tired. This understaffing has to stop so we can take care of our patients. When you are outsourcing jobs and bringing in inexperienced people, that jeopardizes public safety too."

Isaac, a respiratory therapist who has worked 11 years at UCSD, told our reporters, "We simply don't have enough staff to safely manage these patients. Every day, I have to see who is the least sick, and if you're not completely sick, I have to see you last. Simply because there is not enough staff and I have to deal with the sickest patients first. It's worse for those not-as-sick patients, because without the extra care, it extends their stay; they might have negative consequences because of that. It's disgusting, they've made a profit off everything."

He told the WSWs how hospital staff are not able to live in San Diego or survive off the pay of a single job. "Most people commute an hour and a half away, in Riverside County, because they can't afford San Diego. Most of us have two jobs." On top of this, Isaac noted, "Our pensions are constantly in jeopardy, they offer new hires 401(k)s instead of traditional pensions."

When asked his thoughts about the way forward he said, “I’m on board to continue the strike. Ultimately, all this is affecting sick patients. I have people come in and I ask ‘What brings you to the E.R. (emergency room)’ and they say ‘I ran out of medicine, because I ran out insurance.’”

Mike, who has worked for 4 years in patient transport, told the WSWs about his working conditions: “Our patients have to wait to be attended, our own director said it was unacceptable to have patients wait more than 30 minutes after a procedure is done. In some cases, there is only a certain amount of oxygen in a patient’s tank, and there is no one there to look after them. Even if they just had an x-ray done, it could be an hour before anyone sees them.”

Asked about management, Mike replied, “They don’t care; it’s just about the money. Their bonuses are outrageous; one was \$500,000. The provost, or one of them, gets paid \$800,000 a year. Yet, I know people who have to live in Tijuana [in Mexico]. The janitor lives there and has to ride his bike to work.”

Nearly every striker was for expanding the strike past Wednesday, and Mike was no exception, saying, “I think they should extend the strike. Anyone here would support it, because they’re serious about it. It’s not a joke.”

Comments on the CNA social media pages called for an expansion of the strike to other sections of nurses and across the country including comments that “Kaiser nurses should stand with them” and “Florida needs to follow.”

Meanwhile, graduate and undergraduate students have begun discussions on social media about joining the strike and boycotting UC’s graduation ceremonies planned over the next couple of weeks.

One PhD student at UC Berkeley posted on social media that he was joining the strike: “Felt sick to my stomach emailing my advisor about it, but I will be staying out of lab and off of campus while AFSCME 3299, California Nurses Association, and UPTE-CWA strike. ... I can’t cross their picket line after 97% of them voted to go without pay and strike. I know our lives are hectic and busy, but I at least urge every one of my friends at Cal to come out to the picket line (Bancroft and Telegraph) for a while to show support for the people who provide us with the privilege of a clean, functioning campus.”

A UC undergraduate posted, “Does this make anyone else want to stand with the AFSCME 3299 and protest graduation? Are they really going to give our seven figure salaried chancellor the stage when the majority of UC workers are calling for a boycott because of low wages, lowered retirement and healthcare cuts? What a despicable slap in the face to the entire institution.”



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