

UC healthcare and service workers to begin three-day strike

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Following a 96 percent strike vote, 25,000 employees at the University of California are preparing for a three-day strike from Tuesday, October 23 through Thursday, October 25. This is the largest group of service and patient care workers in California, represented by the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME).

AFSCME is the largest of the fifteen unions in the UC system, representing its lowest-paid workers, over 8,000 of whom are service workers and 13,000 patient care workers. They will be joined in a solidarity strike by the University Professional Technical Employee-Communications Workers of America (UPTA-CWA), which represents 15,000 UC communications workers.

For over a year, AFSCME has kept its 25,000 members on the job without a contract. Their current contract expired June 30, 2018 and workers have been kept completely in the dark about the negotiations between the union and UC.

AFSCME claims that the University of California has locked them out of negotiations, offering 3 percent across-the-board raises for each year of the contract and the elimination of step increases for five years. Additionally, the union states that UC's current proposal raises the retirement age to 65 and provides no wording to prevent contracting-out of jobs.

Despite the empty phrases by AFSCME about opposing "contracting out jobs," the unions have put up no fight against this practice, subcontracting jobs to outside companies and UC's own Temporary Employment Services (TES). Workers at subcontractors are paid as much as 53 percent less than UC career workers, in addition to receiving only catastrophic health benefits if any, and can be fired for any reason, including for calling in sick.

According to an AFSCME report in 2015, UC uses at least 45 private contractors which employ thousands of workers, who work alongside UC employees performing jobs as custodians, security officers, parking attendants, and food service workers.

UC claims subcontract workers provide "temporary relief"

when staffing levels are low. However, since low staffing levels are predominately the new normal, heavier workloads result in staggering rates of injury. Injuries have increased by 19 percent for service workers at UC Berkeley since 2010, with an alarming 41 percent jump in injuries for custodians.

Workers on social media have expressed anger and hostility that they have been kept in the dark about the state of negotiations and the contract and also point to plans by AFSCME to raise union dues by two percent in January 2019. One worker warned, "Get it, they [AFSCME] are deceiving you. They work together [with UC]. In turn, the union is not doing its job for their people." Another complained that "the union is raising our dues AGAIN in January to 2%, so really what are they fighting for. Us or them selves. Screw AFSCME and their political agenda."

Another noted: "3% is not a raise, they will take it in parking & healthcare. There is a bigger picture here, our retirement, & job security. You don't accept a 3% raise while agreeing to 401k, emergency lay off, & raising healthcare. They are the largest employer in the state & just greedy to the max. There is no reason we should give in to such a ridiculous offer from UC. Also they are saying we make much more than people nation wide, for example, Texas. Well guess what? Texas rent is \$300 while CA rent is \$3000. We are only asking for a living wage, they are raking in money constantly, they can give us what we want."

Workers should recall that in February 2014, 96 percent voted to strike, and the union cancelled the scheduled March strike days just days before, accepting a concessions contract and hailing it as a "victory" for AFSCME. Of course, the 2014 "victory" has done nothing to prevent workers from sinking even further into poverty and below a living wage.

At the time, AFSCME president Kathryn Lybarger said, "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 2014 contract handed UC administration its top

priority of pension reform. This resulted in workers having to pay 2.5 percent more out-of-pocket into their pensions, which amounted to a cut in real wages after the paltry three percent across-the-board wage increases. The current proposal put forward by UC not only increases pension contributions by workers, but offers a 401(k) package to new hires as an “option,” while it is clear this will be the model for the future. UC administration and the ruling class as a whole view pensions as an unnecessary drain on profits.

AFSCME has 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.” Of course, the union has never explained why it continues to negotiate these poverty wages.

Some workers have also spoken out about a recent report by AFSCME, *Pioneering Inequality*, which stressed that the real travesty is racial inequality among the lowest paid, as for example, that a Latino female service worker makes a dollar less an hour than her white male counterpart. The report suggested that the issue is not that workers are paid poverty wages, but low wages should be more equally distributed among the races. One worker proclaimed on social media, “Stop making it about race and gender. The bottom line is administrators are overpaid. Everyone else is underpaid.”

The union is seeking to sow even more division within its ranks by pitting combinations of races and genders against each other. Earlier this year when UC police brutally arrested AFSCME worker David Cole—a 51-year-old housing and dining services employee, during a lunchtime protest, the union proclaimed the police assault was racially based, and made no mention that a worker demanding a living wage and safe staffing had been attacked at a labor rally.

UC unions all have as a “No Strikes” clause for the duration of contracts, and verbiage that if a strike is planned the UC administration must have 10 days notice to seek scab labor and lessen the impact.

UC has balkanized the workforce and bargains with at least 15 different unions to keep the workers from organizing and linking their similar struggles for a living wage, health and retirement benefits, and safe staffing levels for both patients and workers.

The behemoth UC system reported global assets of \$109.8 billion. The University of California is the largest non-governmental employer in the state of California, which in turn is the world’s fifth largest economy, with a GDP larger than that of United Kingdom.

The UC system plays a critical role in setting the bar for wages and working conditions throughout the state and beyond its borders. According to the UC Office of the

President, the institution “generates more than \$46 billion in economic activity in California” and “supports 1 out of every 46 jobs” in the state.

While UC workers are in a powerful position, they face a great enemy in the UC administration and Regents, composed of the highest levels of the Democratic Party-controlled state. Eighteen of its 26 board members are hand selected by the Governor of California, and seven are ex officio members, comprised of the current Governor, Lieutenant Governor, Speaker of the State Assembly, State Superintendent of Public Instruction, president and vice president of the Alumni Associations of UC, and president of the University of California.

The calculated placement of Janet Napolitano, the former Secretary of Homeland Security under President Barack Obama, as President of UC regents is part of preparation by the financial oligarchy in anticipation of upheavals among workers and students.

A 2016 study by Occidental College found that 70 percent of all UC clerical and administrative employees face food insecurity, with 45 percent reporting “very low food security” stating that they often skip meals and go without food because they cannot afford it.

Among UC students, 42 percent report food insecurity, and within that 23 percent report at “very low” levels. Five percent of UC students reported in surveys that they experienced homelessness, and among students without the support of family or parents—the number is twice that, ten percent.

AFSCME workers must link up with other UC workers, temporary, and subcontract workers to form rank and file committees, independent of their unions which are bound to the Democratic Party. Only these organizations, democratically controlled and elected by workers, can break through the isolation of a repeat of 2014’s three day strike charade, and expand it to other UC workers, students and beyond who face the same conditions.

The author recommends:

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[10 September 2018]



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