

AFSCME officials attempt to suppress WSWs reporting team

Union shuts down three-day strike by California health care and service workers

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A three-day strike by service and patient tech workers at the University of California ended on Thursday, despite the fact that nothing has been won for the workers, who are the lowest paid in the public institution of higher learning.

Nearly 24,000 workers are in the union that organized the strike, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). This includes over 8,000 service workers (custodians, food and hospital service workers, and shuttle bus drivers) and 13,000 patient care workers, such as operation room specialists, respiratory therapists, patient care assistants, pharmacy technicians, hospital lab techs, phlebotomists.

However, turnout for the strike was reportedly low, with as many as 75 percent workers reporting for work. This reflects a complete lack of confidence in AFSCME and its stunts. After a similar strike in 2014, AFSCME signed a deal with the employers and hastened to declare a “victory.” In fact, the contract did nothing to prevent workers from sinking even further into poverty.

AFSCME has kept its 25,000 members on the job without a contract for over a year. Their current contract expired June 30, 2017.

The WSWs spoke to striking workers at the UC Los Angeles and UC San Diego Medical Center.

Mike, a pharmacy tech, has been working at UC San Diego for seven years. He said he was striking to improve work and patient care. “We need resources, a sustainable living. Cost of living is expensive, especially in San Diego. Rent increases every year. Day care is very expensive, and we receive no benefits for this.

“I used to work in private sector and did not need to pay for parking. Not only do we pay for parking, you need to come one hour early to find it. ‘A-spots’ reserved for supervisors, doctors, and faculty members are always open, which only highlights the inequality.”

When asked why the strike was contained to three days, Mike said that the three-day strike was for minimizing the impact, as strike pay is only a small percentage of a regular daily wage. The union has accustomed workers to accepting paltry strike pay as a normal practice. Meanwhile, AFSCME is the third largest contributor to political campaigns, having donated more than \$90 million since 1990, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, primarily to the Democratic Party.

Lee Saunders, the President of AFSCME, was paid \$359,000 last year, which put him in the top one percent of income earners in the US. The national union spent \$200 million in 2017, including \$0 in strike benefits.

Marisol has been a food service worker at UC San Diego for eight years. She told reporters that this was the second time the union struck this year. “I have two children and have to pay for everything—health insurance, rent, food. I don’t make enough to sustain my family.”

At the UC Los Angeles Campus, AFSCME officials attempted to prevent WSWs reporters from handing out material and speaking to striking workers. One union official forcibly grabbed flyers from a reporter and threw them in the trash.

UCPD Police officers told WSWs reporters that “We [UC] have an agreement with this organization [AFSCME]. It wasn’t always that six or seven officers

could patrol a few hundred people the way things are now. It took a while to get to this agreement, and we don't want to disturb the peace."

One worker who wished to remain anonymous told the WSWS, "There's no one fighting for us. We're alone out here. The Democrats don't support us, and the Republicans don't support us. I'm so sick of fighting when nothing gets won."

"They [the UC System] don't care about us. They just want everything to be faster. Things are really bad now. I know some coworkers who are homeless, and I've heard stories of more. It's not uncommon. We don't make enough to not need some sort of support. It's so much worse if you have a kid too. I don't know how some people do it."

Throughout interviews, reporters were continually harassed by union officials who sought to prevent workers from speaking to the WSWS and denounced it as "anti-union." Despite these threats many workers identified themselves as socialists and were enthusiastic about hearing from socialists on the strike.

The role of the unions in general and AFSCME in particular is to prevent any genuine struggle of workers as they assist management. Lawyers for AFSCME openly expressed their true role when arguing in the recent Supreme Court case *Janus vs. AFSCME*, that "Union security [in the form of mandatory payment of agency fees from workers] is the tradeoff for no strikes."

The union is politically aligned with the Democratic Party, which controls the UC system and the California government. The Democrats, no less than the Republicans, are a party of Wall Street and the military intelligence apparatus, supported by privileged sections of the upper middle class, including the union executives.

There is a determination among health care workers to fight, reflecting a broader mood of militancy and anger in the working class as a whole. Workers voted for strike authorization by an overwhelming 96 percent. AFSCME responded by organizing a limited three-day strike, as it did in 2014. In both cases, AFSCME gave the UC system a ten-day notice, as stipulated in the contract, giving the university ample time to hire temporary scab workers.

UC has divided 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.

Workers currently trapped in AFSCME should link up with other UC workers, temporary, and subcontract workers to form rank and file committees, independent of the unions. Only rank and file committees, democratically controlled and elected by workers, can break through the isolation imposed by the unions and organize a counteroffensive of the entire working class.

The author recommends:

UC healthcare and service workers to begin three-day strike

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