

California university workers in one-day strike across the state

Evelyn Rios
20 March 2019

Thousands of university workers throughout the University of California (UC) higher education system will take part in a one-day strike today across 10 campuses, five medical centers, 16 health professional schools, three national laboratories and numerous satellite facilities that comprise the largest public institution of higher learning in the world.

There are over 25,000 workers in American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 3299 and 13,000 in University Professional and Technical Employees--Communications Workers of America (UPTE-CWA) Local 9119. Workers are striking for wage increases to keep up with rising living costs, for an end to the outsourcing of jobs and use of temporary labor, and in opposition to the 401K-style pension plan the UC Regents are attempting to impose on them.

AFSCME 3299 members, in particular, are some of the lowest-paid in the system, holding positions such as admitting clerks, anesthesia technicians, MRI technologists, cooks, gardeners, security guards and janitorial staff. UPTE members are comprised of case managers, audiologists, animal technicians, lab assistants and pharmacists.

The UC system plays a critical role in setting the bar for wages and working conditions throughout the state and beyond its borders. The University of California is the largest non-governmental employer in the state of California, the world's fifth largest economy, with a gross domestic product larger than that of the United Kingdom.

In 2017, the behemoth UC system reported global assets totaling \$109.8 billion. According to the UC Office of the President, the institution "generates more than \$46 billion in economic activity in California," and "supports one out of every 46 jobs" in the state.

Despite the university system's vast wealth, AFSCME and UPTE have kept their members on the job, working without a contract, since June 30, 2017 and September 30, 2017, respectively.

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" and stating that they often skip meals and go without food because they cannot afford it.

AFSCME 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." Since this 2014 statement, things have only gotten worse.

Metropolitan areas in California that are home to UC campuses have some of the highest costs of living in the US, including Berkeley, San Francisco, Santa Barbara, Los Angeles and San Diego. Additionally, California is home to more of the super-rich than anywhere else in the US. According to the Economic Policy Institute, California ranks among the top five states with the highest income inequality.

UC spokesperson Claire Doan contemptuously rejected the demands of workers for a 16-22 percent wage increase for the poorest workers, calling them "unreasonable double-digit raises."

In the face of these conditions, both AFSCME and UPTE have deliberately worked to suppress the resistance of the workers and restrict work actions to limited and short-term protest strikes. AFSCME has called two previous work stoppages since the expiration of the old contract—a three-day strike in May of 2018 and another the following October.

It has called today's work action in an effort to let off steam with the least possible disruption to the

university. The unions are doing nothing to oppose the university's use of temporary workers as strike-breakers, not are they fighting to mobilize active support among faculty and students.

Workers and students must be warned: They face a bitter enemy in the UC administration and the Regents in a state dominated by the Democratic Party. Eighteen of the UC Regents' 26 board members are hand-picked 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. This board dictates all aspects of life for the 238,000 students and 190,000 staff.

The unions are seeking to diffuse workers' anger and militancy and wear them down so as to ram through another sellout contract, including the substandard pension plan being pushed by the university administration and Regents. Central to this treacherous policy is the promotion of the Democratic Party as the supposed "friend" of working people, when the Democrats are using their control of the state to escalate the assault on university workers.

To this end they are welcoming Vermont Senator and 2020 Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders to campaign among the workers at the UC Los Angeles campus.

The unions are being aided in their effort to promote the Democrats and sell out the workers by fake-left groups such as the Democratic Socialists of America and the International Socialist Organization, which promote Sanders and the Democratic Party and cover for the betrayals of the union leadership. They promote racial and gender politics to divide the workers and block the development of an independent political movement of the working class.

Workers should refuse to accept the limiting of strike action to token one- or three-day strikes, comprised of only a small portion of the workforce. It is necessary to prepare a mass, strike-wide strike to shut down the university system until workers are given a 20 percent wage increase, full health and pension benefits and decent working conditions. University workers should turn out to teachers and students who are striking and protesting in California and across the country in

defense of public education, as well as auto workers in the US, Mexico and Canada who are fighting against plant closures and layoffs.

To carry out such a fight, university workers need to establish rank-and-file committees independent of the unions and both big business parties.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact