

Thousands hold one-day strike at University of California schools and health systems

Evelyn Rios
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Yesterday, thousands of university workers throughout the University of California (UC) higher education system struck in a one-day walkout that spanned ten campuses, five medical centers, 16 health professional schools, three national laboratories and numerous satellite facilities. The UC system is the largest public institution of higher learning in the world.

The limited strike was called by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME L. 3299), which covers over 25,000 workers, and the University Professional and Technical Employees-Communications Workers of America (UPTE-CWA L. 9119), which represents 13,000.

The AFSCME and UPTE workers had been kept on the job without a contract since June 30, 2017, and September 30, 2017, respectively. Workers are demanding wages that keep up with rising costs of living, an end to the outsourcing of jobs and temporary labor, and a halt to the efforts of UC Regents to impose a 401(k) style pension plan on them.

AFSCME members in particular are some of the lowest paid in the system, occupying 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 exact numbers of those engaged in the strike are still unclear. Despite a membership total of 38,000, there appeared to be under 1,000 picketers at each of the 10 campuses. One janitorial worker told the WSWs that most of his department struck but they stayed home since they did not receive strike pay and have to sign in on the picket line.

Despite their actions, the campuses, hospitals,

operating rooms, cafeterias and patient clinics all remained open and running due to thousands of scab workers hired within the past ten days by UC.

As guaranteed in their contracts, the unions provided management a ten-day notice to prepare for a strike. With every walkout, UC spends millions to pay for out-of-state workers hired by strikebreaking companies such as Huffmaster, which organizes flights, hotels, ground travel and orientation trainings for thousands of replacements. On its job postings, Surgical Techs were offered \$50/hour and EVS custodians \$18/hour with a “36 hour minimum hour guarantee if you deploy, even if the strike is averted—if you are ready, willing and able to work each scheduled shift.”

This entire arrangement is worked out to ensure that even a limited one- or three-day action has little to no impact on services. Meanwhile UC bargains with at least 15 different unions to keep the workforce balkanized and prevent their unification.

All UC workers face similar conditions, shrinking wages relative to cost of living, outsourcing, increasing healthcare costs and attacks on retirement. One UC Los Angeles cafeteria cashier, a Teamsters member, told the WSWs, “Most of us are out there, I wish I was out there too. They do this on purpose to keep us from all going out at the same time.”

Workers should reject the largely ceremonial action called by the unions, consisting of only a fraction of UC workers, and organize a fight to stay out until workers’ demands are met.

Dorothy, a food service worker at the UC Los Angeles campus for eight years, expressed her frustration that no progress has been made after working nearly two years without a contract. “We struck for three days in May and again in October and nothing happened,” she told the WSWs. “I do not

know why being out one day now will make any difference.”

Dorothy also noted that more of her co-workers were not supporting the strike this time because they do not believe it will do any good and they do not want to lose a day of pay.

When their contract expired in 2017, 96 percent of AFSCME workers voted to strike. Workers are determined to fight, however they must draw the necessary lessons. The unions, which are the largest contributors to the Democratic Party, function to impose the austerity demands of the corporate-controlled politicians.

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 UC. This Democratic board dictates all aspects of life for the 238,000 students and 190,000 staff across the system.

AFSCME proclaimed their previous contract a “victory” when it was ratified in 2014. However, it has done nothing to keep pace with the rising cost of living and increases to out-of-pocket pension costs. The contract being prepared will be a further attack on pensions as UC attempts to rid itself of its retirement obligations and push a 401(k) on new hires.

AFSCME admits 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 that 2014 statement, things have only gotten worse.

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.

Alberto Ramirez, a gastrointestinal technician at UC San Diego, told the WSWs, “We are fighting for decent hours and the university is trying to raise health premiums. If you don’t know whether you have enough hours to provide for yourself, how are you going to provide for your patients?”

“The UC system sees us as just another number. They’re ignoring cost of living in San Diego. People can’t afford day care, they can’t buy a house. We’re

just fighting for dignity and respect as human beings. This hospital brings in our family and friends. Their focus is to try and make as much money as possible. They’re saying we’re out here for asking too much.”

UC workers are an extremely powerful force, representing the largest non-governmental group of workers in the state of California, the world’s fifth largest economy with a GDP larger than the United Kingdom.

The plight of UC workers is bound with the plight of all other workers. The UC System plays a critical role in setting the bar for wages and working conditions throughout the state and beyond its borders.

In order to realize their power workers must begin organizing together with other staff, nurses, administrative employees, graduate and undergraduate students, independent of the unions and big business parties. They should begin discussing the formation of rank and file workplace committees with their coworkers to expand their struggles and transform them into a powerful counter-offensive against austerity and social inequality.



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