

Lower turnout for second one-day strike at California universities and health systems

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On Wednesday, thousands of workers throughout the University of California (UC) higher education system struck in a one-day action across the state. UC is the largest public institution of higher learning in the world, comprised of 10 campuses, five medical centers, 16 health professional schools, three national laboratories and numerous satellite facilities.

The action was the second one-day strike called by American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 3299 in less than a month. Participation in the first strike, called on March 20, was much higher than on Wednesday.

The exact number of those who engaged in the strike has not been reported, but many media outlets reported 200-300 strikers at each of the campuses. This compares to nearly 1,000 picketers at each of the 10 campuses in last month's walkout.

The decline is an indictment of the self-defeating policy of the union, which is designed to wear down the workers rather than mobilize the support that exists in the working class for their struggle. By calling token one-day actions and isolating the workers from other education workers and the working class as a whole, the union hopes to dissipate the workers' anger and militancy and force them to accept a sellout agreement.

Two days of lost wages, costing between \$150 and \$300, is a major sacrifice for workers who make a poverty wage and face high living costs. AFSCME 3299 members are some of the lowest paid workers in the system, occupying positions such as admitting clerks, anesthesia technicians, MRI technologists, cooks, gardeners, security guards and janitorial staff. The union has kept them on the job without a contract since June 30, 2017.

AFSCME provides no strike pay, despite its large bank balance. Instead, it squanders the workers' dues

payments on donations to politicians of the two big business parties, mainly those of the Democratic Party, which is overseeing the union membership's impoverishment in California. According to Opensecrets.org, AFSCME handed over \$13,397,952 to candidates, primarily Democrats, in the last election cycle.

The workers are demanding wages that keep up with rising living costs, an end to the outsourcing of jobs and use of temporary labor, and rejection of the 401(k)-style pension plan the Democratic Party-controlled UC Regents are attempting to impose on them.

The UC Office of the President (UCOP) has issued warnings before each of the strikes that workers who call in sick on those days will be required to present a doctor's note. In addition, the university system has hired hundreds of strikebreakers. The University of California uses the ten-day strike notice given by the union to hire scabs, recruited by agencies such as Huffmaster and Healthsource Global Staffing.

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

Overseeing the vicious anti-labor policy is the president of the UC system, the former secretary of homeland security under Obama, Janet Napolitano.

WSWS reporters spoke to striking workers at the UC Los Angeles and UC San Diego medical centers.

Miguel, a cook employed by UCLA Housing and Hospitality, spoke of the attack on retirement benefits and the low wages. "Retirement age for UC workers is 50, but UC is trying to push that up to 65 years. We get

paid double for overtime, but they are trying to take that out.

“I can’t pay rent with a single paycheck, and every two weeks I’m forced to work overtime to get by. I have a daughter who is 21 and wants to study medicine, but that is an expensive field and I don’t know if I’ll be able to support her. I’m proud to be working at UCLA, knowing that I’m helping support the students who will be leading us in the future, but UC is making it harder to keep working here. If this continues, I’ll quit and look for better work somewhere else.”

Asked why all UC workers were not striking at once, Miguel said, “They are all different unions, but if all unions are able to combine and launch a strike, then we have real power.”

Carmen, an administrative assistant at UC San Diego, was out supporting AFSCME workers during the lunch hour. Her union, Teamsters Local 2010, refused to honor the strikers’ picket lines. “We should all be striking together,” she said. “They bargain with the various unions at different times to prevent a strike that would actually halt operations and show our strength.”

Carmen said UC was attempting to turn her and her co-workers into strikebreakers, sending an email to all non-AFSCME employees urging them to “volunteer for a labor pool” to perform tasks such as “escorting patients, running small deliveries, moving wheelchairs, and taking notes.”

“I am appalled that UC has tried to turn us into strikebreakers. I was disgusted when I received that message, along with many others from our CEO that basically demonized AFSCME workers, who are some of the lowest paid.”

AFSCME workers should begin discussing the formation of rank-and-file committees with their coworkers to expand the struggle and break through the isolation imposed on them by the unions.



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