

University of California union attempts to wear down workers with a sixth 24-hour strike

Evelyn Rios
13 November 2019

On Wednesday, 25,000 workers are set to strike throughout the University of California (UC) higher education and health care system in a one-day action across the state.

The UC system is the largest public institution of higher learning in the world, comprised of 10 campuses, three medical centers, 16 health professional schools, three national laboratories and numerous satellite facilities.

Workers are being taken out on their sixth 24-hour strike since their contract expired over two years ago on June 30, 2017. They have been kept on the job by their union, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 3299.

The union said it called Wednesday's strike as part of its filing of six Unfair Labor Practice (ULP) charges against UC to the Public Employee Relations Board (PERB). The union alleges that UC violated state law by secretly extending and expanding the scope of its outsourcing agreements without notifying the employees and unions.

On October 25, California's PERB announced it had found sufficient evidence to issue a formal complaint against UC for contracting out positions without consulting the union.

AFSCME notes that according to documents filed with the state legislature, "UC said it spent just over \$345 million in 2016 to outsource jobs normally performed by AFSCME 3299 represented UC employees—everything from custodial, food service and transportation services, to nursing assistants and patient billers in 2016. In August of 2019, UC notified state legislators that it now spends \$523 million on these same services—a growth rate in outsourcing that is roughly three times larger than its direct employment growth for the same jobs."

The union calculates that UC has increased its spending

on the outsourcing of campus service and patient care jobs as much as 52 percent since 2016.

According to AFSCME, 7,000 to 10,000 jobs have been cut over the past three years and replaced with non-union contract employees. For the union, the outsourcing of 10,000 dues paying members—who pay \$70 a month—adds up to a loss of about \$700,000 per month or \$8.4 million per year.

Article 6 of the PERB complaint lays out the fundamental issues at stake, which is the fact that the union was not able to negotiate the terms of the outsourcing and reduce the wages of its members in order to keep the jobs in-house. The "Respondent [UC] engaged [in outsourcing]" it reads, "without prior notice to Charging Party [AFSCME] and without having afforded charging party an opportunity to meet and confer over the decision to implement the change in policy and/or the effects of the change in policy."

The real concern of AFSCME is not the fact that workers have been kept on the job without a contract for two-and-a-half years, or the impoverishment of its membership, the attacks on health care premiums, increases in out-of-pocket retirement, or the abolition of pensions in place of a 401k plan. Instead it opposed to the reduction in dues income and wants the opportunity to impose wage and benefit cuts before the university outsources the jobs.

Despite the empty phrases by AFSCME about opposing outsourcing, for decades the unions have put up no fight against this practice nor have they said anything against UC's own Temporary Employment Services (TES). Subcontracted workers 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.

UC workers must be warned, AFSCME and the trade unions in general are determined to impose another concessions contract and have only called these limited actions to dissipate anger with fruitless actions.

For each of the 24-hour Hollywood stunt strikes, the unions provide the UC Regents ten days' notice, allowing the University system to prepare by spending millions on staffing agencies such as Huffmaster, which organizes flights, hotels, ground travel, and orientation trainings for thousands of strikebreaking staff.

Workers on social media have expressed anger and hostility that they have been kept in the dark about the state of negotiations for years while being taken out on impotent strikes without pay.

On Facebook one worker exclaimed, "This is not a union! They do not have the employees', as a collective, best interests. They do not return phone calls, nor do they care about anything except fighting regardless of the employees they are affecting. No contract in 2 years is ridiculous... I wish these greedy people will realize they are no better than the regents and I want my dues back!"

Another worker demanded transparency and questioned the lack of strike pay. "What did the union do with our strike funding? How did the union purchase their million-dollar building in Oakland? How is the union 'broke' when 26k members pay \$80 a month?"

Another worker linked the struggle of UC workers to autoworkers. "We need to stop messing around and strike like the UAW. We support UAW in their cause, but WE haven't done anything substantial in over two years! These little rallies and 1-day strikes may be somewhat effective but UC CLEARLY DOSN'T CARE! Let's stop trying to reason with unreasonable old shrews and hit them where it matters most. In their greedy pockets!"

The UC strike was originally set to coincide with a five-day strike by 4,000 Kaiser Permanente psychologists, mental health therapists and other medical professionals. The strike scheduled for November 11–15 would have shut down mental health services at more than 100 clinics and medical facilities from San Diego to Sacramento. The union, the National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW), decided to postpone the strike due to the death of Kaiser CEO Bernard Tyson. "Our members ...understood that a strike would not be appropriate during this period of mourning and reflection," NUHW officials said.

UC and the health care giants are working overtime to prevent workers throughout the state from engaging in actions that threaten a mass strike. UC is the largest

nongovernmental employer in the state, the world's fifth largest economy. The wages of UC's workers set the bar for pay and working conditions in the state and beyond.

In preparation for upheavals among workers and students, the Democratic Party and financial aristocracy that run the state appointed Janet Napolitano, Secretary of Homeland Security under President Barack Obama, as UC president.

AFSCME is attempting to pose as an opponent of the UC Regents but they are the largest contributors to the Democratic Party, which is deeply interconnected to the Regents at the highest levels of the state.

Eighteen of the 26 Regent board members are selected by the governor of California, and seven are ex-officio members, including Governor Gavin Newsom, the lieutenant governor, the speaker of the California Assembly, the state superintendent of public instruction, the president and vice president of the Alumni Associations of UC, and the president of the University of California.

UC workers are a powerful force. In order to realize their power, they must organize together with other staff, nurses, administrative employees, graduate and undergraduate students, independent of the unions and big-business parties. They should form rank-and-file workplace committees with their coworkers to expand their struggles, and to break from the unions which keep them divided and bound to the UC Regents and the Democratic Party.

Newsom and the Democratic Party claim there is no money for workers' needs in a state that is the home to Silicon Valley, Hollywood, aerospace and defense industries and scores of billionaires. The defense of workers' jobs and living standards, however, is only possible through the launching of an industrial and political counteroffensive by the working class and a frontal assault on the concentrated wealth of the corporate and financial aristocracy. Today the fight for the most elemental needs of the working class poses the need for political struggle against both corporate-controlled parties and the fight for a radical redistribution of wealth, that is, the fight for socialism.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact