

Record low numbers participate in 24-hour stunt strike at University of California schools and health system

Evelyn Rios
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Although the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) called on 25,000 workers across the University of California (UC) higher education and health care system to participate in a one-day strike Wednesday, a record low number of workers responded.

Tired of being taken out on fruitless actions, the number of workers participating in the sixth 24-hour strike this year hit an all-time low. The participation in these stunts has been in sharp decline with nearly 1,000 picketers at each of the 10 campuses participating on March 20, 200-300 per campus on April 10 and only 70-100 at each campus on May 16. On Wednesday, the numbers fell to 50 workers at each campus, or a total of 2 percent of the 25,000-strong workforce.

The dismal turnout did not reflect a lack of desire to fight. On the contrary, workers are willing to carry out a serious fight to demand wages that keep up with rising living costs and an end to the outsourcing of jobs and temporary labor. But workers have no confidence that AFSCME, which has long colluded with the California Democratic Party establishment's austerity regime, will do anything to seriously fight for their interests.

Workers at UC San Diego and UC Berkeley campuses told WSWS reporters that they resented being forced to work without a contract and were tired of the limited and unpaid one-day strikes.

"The union representative was telling us we're so lucky to work here because we get better pay thanks to them," a primary care worker at UCSD told the WSWS. "But actually, things only improved because we struck and fought, not AFSCME. I found that insulting. This contract has not been out since 2017. It's ridiculous. AFSCME, you don't value us."

He continued, "How they schedule strikes is not effective, either. Even if they did two days, it would've been more effective. You would've had more people, and after the holiday weekend it would've really impacted management. There's no power when it's broken in pieces. I haven't seen any strike pay. At least pay for day care because we're taking a big hit. It's a whole day's wages. If we're paying dues, then give them back. A union official told us that our union dues go toward discounts for plane tickets and stuff. I'm like, 'UC does that!'"

A medical assistant at UC San Diego told the WSWS, "Outsourcing can affect us personally. Management is bringing in scabs, paying for their hotels and flights. They're willing to pay for more facilities but not more staff. I haven't seen a cost-of-living increase for three years. I have a family to feed." Commenting on the lower and lower participation for the one-day walkouts, she said, "The last time they had a strike no one came."

WSWS reporters also spoke to strikers at a rally on the UC Berkeley campus. Khalid, a journalist with the student radio, asked, "Why so few students seemed interested in the protest?" As an IYSSE member explained, "It isn't the case that students are uninterested. There's broad sympathy for the workers of the UC and interest in fighting inequality. But, like many of the workers themselves, they, even if unconsciously, see these one-day strikes as token activities that accomplish nothing."

Leah, a 34-year-old patient record abstractor at UC Merced told WSWS reporters that she did not strike because AFSCME doesn't represent her: "While I do believe overall that unions are good, AFSCME never talks to us about facts. We have received no real update on bargaining and actually have to get our facts from UC on what the last offer was. The union doesn't give us the information. Many people are asking on Facebook why they can't pay us to strike. They take 2 percent of my wages, over \$130 dollars a month, and our pleas for strike pay fall on deaf ears. What I don't understand is that they tell us that our pay is poverty wages, and all I can think is that you, the union, negotiated this pay!"

Leah noted that she had been a previous opponent of the Janus vs. AFSCME decision and had rallied against what she understood as a wider attack on the rights of workers to organize. Leah said she was a socialist, very critical of her dues going to the Democratic Party. She expressed hostility to the use of racial politics to divide workers. "When I first started at UC and joined AFSCME, one of the first things I saw on their shirts was the phrase, 'the darker the skin, the lower the wage.'" She said as a black woman she was singled out and told that UC pays her white co-workers \$5 dollars more an hour. Surprised by the brazenness of their assertions, she responded,

“I have been working since I was 16, not once has race ever been an issue, so please don’t try to make it one now.”

Between 50 and 75 workers struck at the UC Los Angeles campus, joined by students urged to come by their professors, primarily from a Labor class and a Chicano Studies class. JD has been with facilities maintenance for 35 years. He explained that the proposed 4 percent a year wage increase is actually eliminated during the course of the contract through the elimination of step increases and medical increases. “Basically, the raise is going to pay for the increase in medical, so they are handing you money at the front door but taking it out at the back door.”

Vijay Singh is a housekeeper with Environmental Services and has been with UC for eight years. Viljay stressed that “the increase in my pension contribution, medical benefits, and parking will wipe out this increase.”

The union claims that Wednesday’s strike was due to UC violating state law by secretly extending and expanding the scope of its outsourcing agreements without notifying the employees and unions. AFSCME filed six Unfair Labor Practice (ULP) charges against UC to the Public Employee Relations Board (PERB).

AFSCME is currently bargaining with UC over two units—UC Patient Care Technical Workers (EX) and UC Service Workers (SX).

UC’s last offer in October for Patient Care Technical workers included an 18 percent across-the-board increase over the next five years and performance-based step increases. For service workers, UC has offered a 23 percent across-the-board increase over the next five years and performance-based step increases in July 2022 and July 2024.

Some workers have stated that they would welcome this increase if offered the chance to vote on it. However, the total values are not guaranteed, as the step increases would be merit-based and at the whim of a supervisor. More fundamentally, the jobs that these raises pertain to will soon be a thing of the past as the number of outsourced jobs continue to grow exponentially.

The union 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.”

Since 2016, UC has increased its spending on the outsourcing of campus service and patient care jobs as much as 52 percent.

AFSCME claims that between 7,000 and 10,000 jobs have been cut over the past three years in place of non-union contract employees. The chief concern of the AFSCME officials is the

dues-income loss of roughly \$1.2 to \$2 million per month, or \$14.5 to \$24 million per year for the union. AFSCME officials want a chance to negotiate lower wages in order to convince UC to keep jobs in-house and the dues money flowing.

A betrayal is unfolding behind the backs of workers. As the WSWS noted, “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 healthcare premiums, increases in out-of-pocket retirement, or the threat to pensions in place of a 401k plan, but rather that dues revenue will be lost if UC continues to employ outsourced nonunion labor at the current rate.”

Despite posturing about opposing outsourcing, for decades the unions have waged no genuine fight against the practice, nor have they protested UC’s own Temporary Employment Services (TES).

UC workers must be warned: AFSCME and the trade unions are trying to wear UC workers down with these one-day stunts in order to soften them up for even more draconian concessions.

Cafeteria workers at UC San Diego, who belong to the Teamsters union, told reporters that not a single strikebreaking staff had been brought in by management to cover strikers, and that in fact they were asked to do more and take up some of the responsibilities of their co-workers. Angel told reporters, “This is the first time they didn’t bring in outside staff to fill positions. It was like they knew no one would go out.”

UC workers must join together, organize rank-and-file committees and break from the stranglehold of the trade unions, the Democratic party and UC Regents. Only in this way can a powerful industrial and political counter-offensive be launched aimed at a radical redistribution of wealth and the provision of hundreds of billions of dollars to provide free and high-quality higher education and health care for all.



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