

Striking university workers speak out: “Assange won’t be defended by the rich, it must be the working people!”

Our reporter
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WSWS reporters spoke with striking outsourced workers at University College London (UCL), on Tuesday. Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members campaigned with the election statement: “Socialist Equality Party stands in UK general election: No to austerity, militarism and war! Free Julian Assange! For class struggle and socialist internationalism!”

Emperatriz, a cleaner supervisor originally from Peru, said, “I’ve worked here for six years. I’ve never had a paid sick day. And I know I cannot get maternity payments. Paternity is the same. On the days when UCL is closed we are obliged to take them as holiday. We have 14 days free per year. Now [outsourced cleaning staff company] Sodexo has come in in the last year, and these new workers have even fewer rights. Zero-hours contracts, people being phoned to come in tomorrow for two hours. No bank holidays, no Christmas, no holidays, nothing. And there is more and more work to do. Six years ago when I first came here I had to cover two buildings, now it’s four. We’re up to here with these conditions. We’ve had enough.

Emperatriz drew attention to the SEP’s election demand for Julian Assange’s freedom. She said, “Free Assange! Without people like him we understand nothing. Because the mainstream news is full of liars. But this man, he showed us the real world, gave us a way to see what was really happening. The governments hated it. How many people were killed that we didn’t know about? While the governments become more and more rich.”

Asked whether she agreed with the SEP’s perspective of basing his defence on a mass movement of the working class, she replied, “Yes, I agree. Assange won’t be defended by the rich, it must be the working people, it’s them he has helped.

Asked how the dispute came about, security guard,

Zayad said, “I work five days a week, some people are on three on three off, 12 hours a day, you can imagine. And I also work at night, staying up watching CCTV.

“This process has taken nearly a year now. We’ve spoken to UCL a few times asking them for better terms and conditions for our workers, meaning porters, security and cleaners. And they basically said, ‘No, we can’t afford to bring you in-house and give you better terms and conditions.’ We tried to negotiate but they didn’t want to talk.

“After 15-20 years of being outsourced people got tired of it, they could feel themselves getting poorer. And we could see our in-house counterparts getting better terms and conditions than us, for doing the same jobs. Before the last protest UCL announced that they would bring us in-house in 2021, not now. Apparently, they haven’t got the money to do it now. So the union balloted for a strike and got a 99 percent ‘Yes’ vote.

“We’ve always had unions at UCL, the main one being Unison. What happened with Unison was they never bothered with us workers because they’re cosy with UCL. They are management’s chosen union to work with. They get invited to their meetings, they’re very friendly. And for 10-15 years, people could hardly get Unison to do anything for them. To represent them in terms of disciplinary hearings or in terms of illegal activities by the outsourcing company, in cases of victimisation, they could never get Unison to represent them.”

Zayad explained that Unison were refusing to back the strike. “UCL is a smart institution. They decided not to recognise the IWGB, and to divide people. That’s why you see today that some of us are working and some of us are on strike. Because Unison told their members to go to work.”

Asked about the fact that leaders of the PCS and UCU

unions were on the speakers' list while the SEP had been blocked from speaking on the platform, Zayad said, "I honestly do not know why he said no to you speaking. I can't answer that. But personally, I think you should be allowed to speak... I can only apologise for that."

Léia is a cleaner and originally from Brazil. She said, "We strike today for equal rights. Most people working at UCL have sick pay, holiday pay. We have just 14 days holiday. When UCL is closed they take it off from our holiday, so we end up having just 14 days a year. When we get sick, they don't pay us. Three months ago I had an operation and was off for two months. I received nothing, it's not fair. We wake up at three o'clock in the morning to come to work. So we work very hard, some people here are working 12 hours a day.

"The managers treat us like rubbish. And we come in every morning and clean everything for them, all the spaces they use. While we did that, they never made one complaint about us. But now that we've stopped to strike, they attack us as lazy people. They don't care about us. We also face discrimination from the bosses, as immigrants. We have a lot of people here who don't speak English—they speak Portuguese, Spanish. And we have bosses who take advantage of this.

"We need new terms and conditions. I've worked here for eight years. This is one of the biggest universities in the country, in the world. But they treat caterers, cleaners, security workers appallingly. Five hundred workers are in this position. That's why we're here today. This is the first time that we've got so many people together to strike."

Asked if she saw their strike as part of a common movement of workers in Britain and internationally against inequality and attacks on working conditions, Léia responded, "Of course. If we don't stay united, how can we change things? Because there is a lot that needs to be changed."



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