University of Illinois at Chicago workers go on strike against low wages and unsafe conditions

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Workers at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) have gone on strike as of this morning. The workers, who are in the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), include nearly 4,000 maintenance, clerical, professional, technical, and service employees at the university.

Workers unanimously voted to strike earlier in the month after the year-long contract negotiations between SEIU and UIC management failed to meet workers' most basic demands in the midst of a deadly pandemic. Workers are striking to demand adequate staffing to ensure safety of staff, patients, and students, proper personal protective equipment (PPE), including universal masking and N95s in the hospital, an increase in the base minimum pay to $15 per hour, improvements to workload and time off, and language in the contract that prohibits outsourcing work.

Many workers are angered by the university's failure to provide decent pay as they are risking their lives and those of their families. Sharon Geddis, a service worker at UIC, said: "I am going on strike because I deserve a living wage to be able to enjoy things like any other hard-working person in America. I shouldn't have to struggle from paycheck to paycheck when I'm working every day. President Killeen doesn't have to struggle, why should I?"

The president of the University of Illinois, Timothy Killeen, makes $835,000 a year. He received a 40 percent pay raise only a week after the University of Illinois trustees unanimously approved a tuition hike of 1.8 percent at Urbana-Champaign and Chicago.

Other workers are protesting on similar grounds, demanding that UIC provide PPE to all workers on site. Jonna Mchugh, a student advisor, said: "I'm going on strike because when I have to go back to working on site, I want to be sure that UIC will pull out all the stops to protect me and my coworkers from COVID-19. This includes providing proper PPE to ALL who are on site, ensuring safe staffing levels so that we are not expected to take on more workers with fewer resources, and receiving fair pay for our work."

The Illinois Nurses Association (INA) at the University of Illinois hospital has also been on strike since Saturday, after a three-year contract between UIC and the INA expired. Healthcare workers are striking to demand a limit to the number of patients a single nurse can care for at one time, as there is currently no cap. They are also protesting the hospital's attempt to freeze nurses' pay for three years, which has been met with ferocious hostility by nurses who are working amidst the deadly pandemic. Since the beginning of the pandemic, more than 900 nurses in the United States have died from COVID-19.

The pandemic has only made worse the poor conditions that workers faced before the outbreak of the disease. Despite being located centrally in Chicago, many workers at UIC are paid less than the city's minimum wage. The university takes advantage of a loophole that allows UIC workers to be classified as state workers, thus not subject to Chicago's wage laws, but to Illinois' much lower minimum wage of just $8.25 an hour.

UIC has also faced opposition from full-time teaching staff. Last month, UIC United Faculty issued a statement condemning UIC's plan to reopen campus as not being able to "sufficiently provide for a safe reopening, let alone sustain a healthy open campus for the fall semester."

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The mistreatment of health care and university workers is not limited to UIC or the University of Illinois system. Since the start of the pandemic, the ruling class has blatantly disregarded the safety of workers by failing to provide the most basic protective measures.

The back-to-school drive pushed by both the Democrats and Republicans has resulted in a major outbreak of infections in college towns. The University of Iowa has had at least 1,200 new cases since its reopening. More than 500 people at the State University of New York at Oneonta have tested positive for COVID-19, nearly 17 percent of the student body on campus.

Universities across the country have failed to implement any effective measures to save the lives of their students and staff.

UIC workers are carrying out a brave fight for a livable wage, job stability, and protection of their health and safety during the pandemic. However, they must be warned that if their fight is left in the hands of the SEIU, their struggle will be isolated and defeated.

Already, the UIC workers are marching out on strike without the workers on several other University of Illinois campuses who are organized in the very same union local, SEIU 73. Also in SEIU 73 are 7,500 school support workers who went out on strike with the Chicago Teachers Union last year. In that struggle, the SEIU played a key role in making an appearance of solidarity with the teachers but in reality kept all demands and negotiations separate from one another.

UIC workers must understand that their fight is a part of the broader struggle of the entire working class against the policies of the ruling class in response to the pandemic. The strikes at UIC must be deepened and expanded to all sections of workers who are facing similar conditions. Service workers must join with the nurses as well as graduate students, faculty, teachers and all sections of the working class to build for a nationwide general strike against the deadly back-to-school and work drives.

The WSWS urges workers at UIC to join the growing movement among educators and workers of building rank-and-file committees that are independent of the unions and both the Democratic and Republican parties.

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