

University of California optometrists launch two-day strike

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Optometrists working at University of California hospitals launched a two-day strike last week, joining a growing movement of healthcare workers opposing the escalating attack on healthcare workers and on public health.

A huge number of Californians utilize the UC system for medical care. UC hospitals admitted 170,319 patients in the latest yearly data available, with 370,284 emergency visits and 5.9 million outpatient visits during the same period.

The UC optometrists are covered by the University Professional & Technical Employees (UPTE) union, which deliberately kept the strike restricted to only two days. The UC system reported no significant disruptions as a result of the strike, with only a small portion of optometry appointments being delayed.

UPTE not only covers optometrists at UC but also physician assistants, campus social workers, audiologists and others. The Communication Workers of America (CWA), the union of which the UPTE is a part, has over 700,000 members, none of whom were mobilized to defend the optometrists.

The UPTE has, in fact, already reached agreements with UC for campus social workers at the San Francisco campus and with audiologists at the UC San Diego campus. These agreements were reached while the UPTE was still in negotiations for the optometrists. Those two contracts included 15 percent pay increases and 17 percent pay increases, respectively, over the life of their deals, meager amounts that will do virtually nothing to offset the major cost of living increases these workers have experienced.

Optometrists, like healthcare workers in general, are reporting deteriorating conditions that have an extremely adverse impact on their ability to provide adequate care to patients. They have reported increased

patient loads due to short staffing and below market pay.

The UPTE-initiated strike action, however, was not launched in defense of workers' actual demands but on the basis of "unfair labor practice" charges. The union is charging the UC with violations of state labor law on the basis of allegations that the UC had failed to provide requested information in a timely manner necessary to conduct bargaining.

Actual negotiations for the next collective bargaining agreement will not begin until the summer, with the latest negotiations being part of a "limited integration bargaining process," wherein the two sides are hoping to reach agreement on issues related to incentive compensation (bonuses) and the hiring of an additional 80 optometrists campus-wide.

A statement released by the UC bargaining team reads, in part, "Although unresolved items remain, we believe existing bargaining processes and channels provide the mechanisms for fair and honest negotiation of critical issues, meaningful dialogue, and for each side to reach mutually beneficial agreements."

Despite the restrictions imposed on it by the union bureaucracy, the optometrist strike is part of a growing fightback of healthcare workers both in the US and internationally. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic in particular, has demonstrated that the ruling class is not only willing, but eager to sacrifice the welfare of both healthcare providers and patients to the drive for profit.

Despite chronic understaffing in hospitals across the US and the attendant overwork, the healthcare industry laid off more than 58,560 workers in 2023, a 91 percent increase over the previous year according to job placement firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas.

While the industry makes deep cuts of vital personnel, healthcare workers have launched massive

strikes to stop the bloodletting. Sixteen of the 43 major strikes last year were by healthcare workers, involving more than 112,000 workers combined.

This included the strike of more than 75,000 Kaiser Permanente workers, the largest single healthcare strike in US history by the number of workers involved. Less than a year before, 48,000 University of California academic workers struck against poverty-level wages across the state.

It is absolutely critical that healthcare workers learn the lessons of these and the multitude of other strikes that have taken place among healthcare workers and other workers. At every turn, the unions have worked to isolate and strangle the initiative of workers before it can escape their control.

In the case of the academic worker strike, the UAW continuously gave in to the UC's demands, which was actually the plan from the beginning. Cost of living adjustments were abandoned and an initial demand for \$54,000 in yearly base pay was reduced down to \$34,000, a poverty level wage in California.

In the case of Kaiser, the Coalition of Kaiser Permanente Unions held a contract vote in which it refused to provide details of the agreement until only a few days before balloting started. That agreement contained no provisions related to staffing and included wage increases that failed to keep pace with inflation.

Despite the coalition's claim that the agreement was "historic," Kaiser wasted no time in beginning layoffs of administrative staff at the same time the agreement was reached.

California healthcare unions had also promised that a fight for higher wages was unnecessary due to state passage of a new minimum wage law for healthcare workers. Signed by Governor Newsom in October, 2023, Senate Bill 525 insured a minimum wage at healthcare facilities of \$25 per hour to be implemented at various facilities from 2024 to 2033.

Now, even this poverty wage will likely not materialize as the governor is justifying the indefinite postponement of the new measure in response to retaliatory layoffs being carried out by low-wage employers.

This all makes clear that hospital workers cannot hope to realize any of their demands through the trade union officialdom, which is tied by a million threads to the Democratic Party, and is an active participant in

labor-management partnerships that serve to inflate the profits of the hospital and insurance giants through the depression of workers' wages and living standards.

The only way healthcare workers can take their struggle forward is through the formation of independent rank-and-file committees which will place leadership of the struggle where it belongs, in the hands of the workers themselves.



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