Strike by nearly 40,000 University of California healthcare workers set for next week

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UC workers: Tell us what you are fighting for in next week's strike! All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Nearly 40,000 healthcare workers are preparing to carry out a two-day strike across 10 University of California (UC) campuses next week. Thirty-five thousand workers are associated with the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 3299 and another 4,000 by University Professional and Technical Employees (UPTE-CWA) Local 9119 at the University of California-San Francisco.

The expansive UC system is the largest public institution of higher learning in the world and the third-largest employer in the state of California. It comprises 10 campuses, five medical centers, 16 health professional schools, three national laboratories and numerous satellite facilities.

AFSCME workers include some of the lowest-paid workers in the UC system, occupying an array of critical positions, such as admitting clerks, anesthesia technicians, MRI technologists, cooks, gardeners, security guards and janitorial staff. The union has kept them on the job since their contract expired on June 30.

The UPTE members include lab scientists, pharmacists, dietitians, IT workers, physician assistants, research associates and many more.

This will be the first major strike in the US since the victory of Trump in the presidential election. While Trump was the beneficiary of a collapse in votes for the Democrats, the strike is a preview of the eruption of class conflict as a response to the policies of the incoming ultra-right government.

Two overlapping sections of the working class, healthcare workers and immigrants, will be involved in the strike, with a large number of Hispanic, Chinese, Laotian and Filipino workers in the AFSCME union.

The UC system has emerged as a major political and social battleground. Earlier this year, tens of thousands of UC graduate students carried out a political strike against the Gaza genocide and the brutal attack on anti-genocide student protesters, including at UC campuses. In 2019, UC Santa Cruz grad students carried out wildcat strikes, and in 2022, grad students system-wide carried out a six-week strike which was ultimately betrayed by the United Auto Workers.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to UC workers set to participate in the strike.

Arthur, an ophthalmology technician at the University of California Irvine Medical Center, said, "Our pay just kind of stays the same. Even minimum wage is going up. We see some people getting paid good for different kinds of jobs, but our pay is just still staying the same. ... It hasn't gone up as much as the cost of living has gone up. I mean food, gas, everything goes up. Everything goes up."

He added, "There is also our parking situation. They want to raise that, and we pay a lot for parking. I pay $70 a month for my parking. How much you pay depends on where you park and how long you've been here. I'd like to get closer, you know. I park at the Ayres Hotel right now. And then once you're here 10 years, then you can park here for $70. The hospital contracts out parking spaces with the hotels around here."

David, a healthcare worker at UC San Diego, said, "We need money to pay for housing. We cannot afford to live here. San Diego is the most expensive city in California, we just shot past San Francisco. They have also raised our healthcare costs, they can't do that. I have never before seen this amount of support for a strike here at the hospital, ever. We voted 99 percent."

Paula told reporters: "We seriously need better wages. We can barely pay our bills. I want to see a raise so I can actually pay for food and rent and bills. We are all talking about this in the hospital."

AFSCME and UPTE are asking for an immediate 5 percent raise, with annual increases of 9, 8 and 8 percent over the next three years. UPTE is also calling for a $25

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starting pay retroactive to July 2023. However, this will be insufficient to make up for years of declining wages and will barely meet inflation. According to the Public Policy Institute of California, between January 2020 and June 2023, prices in the state increased by 17.9 percent. UC administrators are countering with a five-year contract with 5, 4 and 2 percent pay increases over the next three years.

While workers are unable to meet the most basic needs, the UC Regents control an investment portfolio of $180 billion. This wealth is only made possible by the low wages of its workforce and increased exploitation of students who are treated as cash cows.

Rank-and-file rebellion needed

UC workers are in a powerful position to carry out a powerful fight against declining wages which for many amount to poverty wages. Their struggle is part of a wider fight, and workers across all industries must come to their support as wages at UC set the bar for pay and working conditions throughout the state and beyond.

In order to win their demands, however, workers must have an understanding of what they are up against. This includes not only the UC Regents but the trade union bureaucracies of AFSCME and UPTE and dozens of other unions, which have accepted contracts and wages which have put workers far behind the costs of inflation and living.

Workers cannot forget the betrayal of 2019, when AFSCME took them on six unpaid one-day strikes between March and November to wear them down and push through the current contract. As the WSWS wrote at the time:

> 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 two-day strike has been categorized by AFSCME and UPTE as an Unfair Labor Practice (ULP) strike, a legal category that restricts raising economic demands. This is a frequent tactic used by union bureaucrats to limit strikes or cancel them altogether.

The trade unions are attempting to portray themselves as opponents of the UC Regents, but they are in fact the largest contributors to the Democratic Party, which is bound to the Regents at the highest levels of the state.

AFSCME has contributed $9,837,237 in the 2024 election cycle so far. The vast majority of these contributions have gone to Democratic candidates and causes, with 99.51 percent of funds coming from the organization itself rather than individuals, according to the website OpenSecrets.

UPTE is part of the larger Communications Workers of America (CWA). That same year, the CWA gave $9.5 million to political candidates, causes and lobbying, primarily to the Democratic Party.

Both the trade union bureaucracies and the UC Regents are the upper echelons of the Democratic Party. Eighteen of the 26 Regent board members are selected by the governor of California, and seven are ex-officio members, meaning they are automatically filled by the current governor (Gavin Newsom), Lieutenant Governor, Speaker of the State Assembly, State Superintendent of Public Instruction, president and vice president of the Alumni Associations of UC and president of the University of California.

The fight at UC requires that workers establish their political independence both from the fascist Trump and from the Democrats, who have joined with Republicans in attacking protesters and are even now fixated on ensuring a “smooth transition” from Biden to Trump. This, in turn, requires a rebellion against the trade union apparatus to transfer power from the bureaucracy to the workers themselves through the formation of rank-and-file committees.

The strike by UC workers is only the first of what will prove to be a massive explosion of the class struggle triggered by Trump’s right-wing policies. Against this turn towards oligarchic rule, the power of the working class must be mobilized against the profit system itself, which is the fundamental cause of dictatorship.

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