

University of California strike raises major political issues

Our reporters
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The ongoing strike by nearly 57,000 University of California (UC) healthcare and service workers highlights the deepening crisis of capitalism and the assault on workers' rights. Called by AFSCME Local 3299 and UPTC-CWA Local 9119, this struggle is not just about wages and staffing but a political confrontation against a system that prioritizes profits and executive salaries over workers' and patients' needs.

As the fascist Trump administration escalates its attacks on immigrant, federal workers and science, the barricades of the class struggle are being erected and it is increasingly clear that only one social force can transform society: the united working class.

For decades, the UC system has become increasingly corporatized, funneling billions into capital projects while its workforce faces declining real wages and worsening conditions. Workers—including physician assistants, optometrists, custodians and mental health professionals—are fighting for fair compensation and the ability to provide safe, effective care amid chronic understaffing. Cities like Los Angeles, San Diego, and San Francisco are particularly affected by the soaring cost of living, exacerbating their struggle.

The UC administration, backed by the Democratic Party, has responded with empty rhetoric, claiming to support workers' rights while dismissing their grievances as “misinformation” in an attempt to discredit legitimate demands while preventing any improvement. Despite UC officials' claims of “meaningful wage increases,” proposed adjustments fail to keep pace with inflation, while executives enjoy skyrocketing salaries, exposing the deep class divide within the institution.

The crisis faced by UC workers is part of a broader global attack on the working class. Systemic understaffing, chronic underfunding, and relentless cost-cutting define the modern healthcare industry, where hospitals operate as profit-driven enterprises at the expense of workers and patients.

Striking UC workers are not just fighting for themselves but for the future of public healthcare and education in

California. Their struggle represents a larger battle against a system that serves the ruling elite at the expense of society's basic needs.

UC workers' militancy far exceeds the union bureaucracy's maneuvers, pointing toward a demand not just for fair wages but for systemic change. The fight for healthcare and education as fundamental social rights requires a socialist transformation—one where society is run for human need, not profit.

On Thursday, the WSWs engaged workers at UC sites across California, revealing widespread disillusionment with both major parties and a growing determination to resist attacks on their livelihoods and fight for a better future.

Jerry, a worker at UC Berkeley, expressed his contempt for both big business parties: “There is no difference. They both wash each other's back; they watch out for each other.” Significantly, he continued, “Obama signed executive order 13603, it says the government can take all natural resources, anything you make, they can take it under national security. And now we have a clown in the White House who's going to do just that. So just be ready. There's no difference between Republicans and Democrats.”

He was critical of the union leaders: “The unions shouldn't support any politicians. When they get to a certain level, they have to be corrupt to stay in office. There's no way around it. There's too much money up there that you have to be corrupt.” Asked about the need to build independent Rank-and File Committees, he said: “That's great. Keep it going. That's what needs to happen. No political party, no Republicans or Democrats.”

In San Diego, WSWs reporters were absurdly accused of crossing the picket line by a union leader over the megaphone. After they left, the union bureaucrat called the police and security to make sure workers would be prevented from speaking to our reporters.

Jacqueline, a staff research associate in the department of Biological Sciences at UCSD, complained of “a complete lack of information about our strike fund. Prior to striking, I was only told that it would be possible to apply to a strike

fund if I was present for a shift on the picket line every day during the 3-day strike, not how much money was available nor how many people would receive this money.”

She continued: “I was directed to apply to the fund on a website with the following message, ‘UPTE’s strike hardship funds are limited. Striking is a sacrifice for everyone. Many UPTE workers make only \$20-30 per hour. In order to conserve our funds for those with the greatest need, we ask that only those facing significant financial hardship due to this strike request a hardship fund payment. The daily max is \$100 and subject to the availability of funds.’”

The union’s language makes workers feel guilty or beg for what is their basic right to a strike fund. “Even though I make on the lower end of that stated income, I still grappled with the decision of whether to apply or not, due to the harsh language of the application. On the form, I was also asked to justify the reason I was applying to the fund.”

“UPTE expects its union members to strike without any knowledge of if, when, or how much they will be paid. Members of UPTE voted overwhelmingly to approve this strike, but we were completely left out of the discussion of how long the strike should last or how it should be organized. On the first day of the strike, senior UPTE members repeatedly stated that we needed to prepare to strike again, and again and again. They told us we needed to be willing to strike ‘as many times as necessary.’ They did so without any additional information of if or how members would receive financial support.”

Natalia in San Diego works in patient care. She emphasized: “Staffing is a big issue, they’re cutting staff and not wanting to open those positions back. So they’re just putting that workflow on the staff that’s already there. It’s overwhelming and tiring and stressful. We get a lot of angry patients because of the turnaround time to get calls or prescriptions back on time.”

Natalia commented on the insufficiency of the strike fund: “They only give us \$100 dollars a day.” Natalia noted that while dues vary based on hours, “anywhere between \$150 to \$200 a month is taken out of paycheck.”

Natalia and her coworkers said they were part of the 2019 and 2013 contract struggles that resulted in contracts and wages that have not kept up with costs of living. She said that the union has meetings, “And there are a lot of people that did speak up and say we should be asking for more, but they just kind of stick to whatever description is already in their paper to read and follow.”

Carolyn, a medical assistant who has worked for UCI Medical Center for 27 years, commented on the increased cost of living: “When I started 27 years ago, we didn’t have a union. AFSCME came in about 25 years ago. I’ll be

honest with you, this is my seventh strike, and we do get some money. But I’m at my peak, so I don’t get any steps. Even then, 3 percent is not going to cover a gallon of milk. It’s not going to cover the eggs, which are like a dollar each now.”

She emphasized her opposition to Trump’s fascistic policies: “Trump came in in January. And between January and now, thousands and thousands of people have been laid off. He keeps on saying he’s worried about the ‘little’ people, but those little people are the ones that you’re firing. So how do you want the country to run if you’re firing all the people or sending all the people back to their countries? They need the ‘little’ people to make everything run, and that’s who they’re throwing away.”

A similar note was struck by **Edgar**, a certified nurse’s assistant (CNA) at the UCI Medical Center: “I’ve worked for 10 years, starting at Tenet until last year, when UCI bought up the Tenet hospitals. When that happened, our benefits changed drastically. Now health insurance is quite high. Benefits at Tenet were very good before. We could take a month off and visit our relatives [abroad]. Now you cannot go on vacation, because we don’t have vacation time.”

Like many, Edgar has to pick up a second job: “As a CNA, we are very behind. They just increased us to \$23 an hour. But it’s not enough for me to take care of my family. So now I also work as a caregiver. I am working two jobs because I have to support my family.”

He was also critical of Trump’s mass firings of federal employees: “A lot of them are saying they’re overworked. We too are so understaffed. Sometimes when there is overflow in the ICU and also during COVID, I’ve worked alone. Lack of manpower. So you get sent all over the place. Many people got COVID, but only three of us didn’t get COVID. During breaks, one section of workers all ate together and then they all got COVID. Then they became our patients!”



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