

Union officials try to block WSWS reporters from speaking to workers as union shuts down UC strike

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This week's brief strikes by University of California (UC) workers ended without resolving their critical demands. Workers are returning under expired contracts, with no clear information on what, if anything, has been won.

The strike exposed the gulf between workers' aspirations and the interests of the UC administration, the entire political establishment and, most significantly, the union apparatus.

The efforts by AFSCME and UPTE officials to bar WSWS reporters from speaking to workers made clear that the union bureaucracy sees its role not as mobilizing workers in a real struggle, but as containing opposition and blocking discussion of broader political issues.

On Thursday, February 27, WSWS reporters were verbally assaulted by union bureaucrats at the UC San Diego picket line. An AFSCME official repeatedly shouted over a megaphone, "We are not taking leaflets here! No leaflets from anybody!" and added, "Don't cross our line."

WSWS reporters were then followed by a security guard, who confirmed that an AFSCME union official had called security. Shortly after, a uniformed police officer arrived at the picket line and spoke with the union bureaucrat, who had shouted at the reporters. When one reporter began recording the interaction on his phone, the security guard told another reporter, "He could be arrested for recording union activity."

The fact that union bureaucrats are calling the police on socialists who are raising broader political questions with workers—at a time when Trump and his administration are carrying out the deepest assault on the working class and gutting social spending—exposes the bureaucracy's fundamentally hostile position toward the workers they claim to represent.

Throughout the strike, workers voiced opposition to attacks on immigrants, mass layoffs and the fascistic Trump administration, which is carrying out an unprecedented assault on the working class. However, the unions refused to address these issues and sought to keep the struggle isolated.

Only the WSWS raised these broader political issues, emphasizing that the fight must be developed as an offensive not only against the Trump administration but also against the

Democratic Party, including the UC Regents and Governor Gavin Newsom, who preside over extreme inequality.

At picket lines from UC San Diego to UC Irvine and UC Berkeley, the WSWS urged workers to build independent committees to take control of the fight and transfer power to the rank and file. Many workers were outraged to learn that a portion of their dues funds the Democrats, with thousands going directly to UC Regent and Governor Gavin Newsom, who plans to slash \$270 million from the UC budget.

Workers are in a powerful position to win real gains, but the union bureaucracy is seeking to impose concessions similar to those in 2013 and 2019—despite inflation and skyrocketing living costs in 2025.

AFSCME Local 3299 and UPTE-CWA Local 9119 represent 57,000 UC workers, yet only a minority participated in the strikes. This was not due to a lack of willingness to fight but rather a lack of confidence in the unions and their controlled "Unfair Labor Practice" (ULP) strikes. These are not genuine strikes but carefully orchestrated stunts designed to keep workers under the control of the union leadership.

A ULP strike is a bureaucratic maneuver filed through the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), allowing brief, scripted walkouts. Workers do not strike on their own terms but on a schedule dictated by the very institutions serving corporate interests. The UC administration understands this, which is why it does not treat these strikes as serious threats.

Meanwhile, AFSCME workers reported that they received just \$100 per day in strike pay, while UPTE members were unsure if they would receive any compensation at all. Many remember past betrayals, such as AFSCME's six one-day strikes in 2019, which ended in a concessions contract after workers were worn down.

The prevailing sentiment among workers was that they should be earning \$50 an hour just to afford basic living expenses in some of the most expensive regions in the country. Yet, their union tells them they will be fortunate to receive an 8 percent raise over three years—an insulting offer, especially when AFSCME President Lee Saunders pockets at least \$398,000 a year.

The central question posed to workers on the picket lines was: Who controls this struggle—its aims and aspirations—the workers themselves, or the union bureaucrats collaborating with the UC?

AFSCME and UPTE kept workers chanting and marching for hours, but many wanted to discuss broader political questions. They engaged in these discussions at length with WSWS reporters, highlighting the gap between the bureaucracy's empty demagogic and the pressing concerns of the rank and file.

John, a patient care worker at UC San Diego, told WSWS reporters Thursday that he was striking “because of the cost of living. We just want living wages. As everything else has increased, our wages have pretty much stagnated. Especially here in San Diego, our rent cap is around 7 percent, and they can raise it every year. Meanwhile, our wages stay the same. The only thing that's going to do is price people out, and that plays a part in the homeless situation here. Everyone wants to be upset about the homeless population, but they're helping create it!

“We actually work for UCSD, which represents the state of California. They know how the crisis works, and yet they don't want to help their own employees. But then they come in here, and they don't do patient care.”

Pointing to the banner at the top of the hospital that reads “#1 in San Diego,” John said, “We made that number! You want to buy your banners, stick them up there, and talk about the honor roll and everything. But what do you do? You don't deserve the right to put that up there.”

Referring to Elon Musk's role in the mass firing of federal workers, John said, “You're the richest man in the world. But now you want to come into government and ‘cleanse’ it of waste? What have you actually done? How many communities have you walked into and said, ‘I see you. These streets are bad. I'm going to take my money, go to the asphalt company, and get them fixed’? You're the richest man in the world—you don't need regulations to do that, you could just do it. If you really wanted to fix homelessness, you're Elon Musk. Have you seen him come in, buy land, and build homes for the homeless?”

John added his opposition to the attacks on immigrants, emphasizing that workers more broadly are in the crosshairs.

Nancy and Esther, two nurse case managers and members of UPTE at the UC Irvine Medical Center in Orange, California, told WSWS reporters Friday that the most urgent issues they face are the workload and short staffing.

Esther explained, “The patient ratio for a case manager here is far beyond what we're paid for. In most hospitals, it's one to 25, but here we do 50, 60, sometimes even up to 80 patients. They hire travelers [travel nurses], but then they quit. They've worked at different hospitals, and they can see the difference. They quit. It's so dysfunctional.”

Nancy added, “I've worked in for-profit hospitals before, and it's even worse than this. I worked at Prime Hospitals, and they

keep buying up other healthcare systems. This is just one of my jobs—I have another one. I don't even know what retirement is going to look like.”

On the Trump administration, Nancy said, “I think Musk is doing what he's doing because his only interest is himself. Trump's the same way—he'll let Musk do whatever he thinks will ‘save money.’ But when this is all over, the only real difference will be that we've made Musk even richer.

“The public sector is being dismantled. You think about education—it's being dismantled in favor of a voucher system. One is replacing the other. That means the poor and middle income families are the ones who are going to lose. The public school system does more than just educate—it guarantees at least one good meal a day, maybe two, for some kids.

“The criteria for private schools may be quite different than they are for public schools. Public schools incorporate all manner of students. The fact that they're talking about canceling programs, specifically for those with disabilities—special ed—I take issue with that. What do working parents do with those kids? This government is not looking out for them.

“I think we're definitely headed in the wrong direction. And if we're not careful, we may end up in another war—a civil war right here. That's where we're heading.”

Esther added, “I come from India. Some people call it a Third World country or whatever, but in our system, education is free. I finished my Bachelor's because I went to a public university, which was free. And we have a public hospital with 1,000 beds. They even do kidney transplants for free.

“When I came to this country, they said there's public education, but education isn't free. You should be able to start working right away rather than spending years paying off loans.

“This is supposed to be the best country in the world? We shouldn't have to fight for our rights. People who are about to retire are out on strike. Should they have to do that? No. It's a messed-up system when you have to fight for what you need. And big hospitals like this are for-profit. Shame on them!”

UC workers run the largest institution of higher learning in the world. They are in a powerful position to fight back against decades of attacks on their living and working conditions. But this struggle requires political demands and organization independent of both capitalist parties—including the Democrats, who fear a rebellion of the working class far more than they fear Trump and his fascist, oligarchic rule.

Contact the WSWS today to build a rank-and-file committee at your hospital, lab and workplace and take this fight out of the hands of the trade union bureaucracy.



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