

Stop the sabotage of the University of California strike: For rank-and-file control of the fight

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After 17 months of stalled negotiations, tens of thousands of University of California (UC) employees are preparing for a historic two-day strike on November 17–18. More than 86,000 workers across hospitals, laboratories and campuses were originally set to walk out, including 21,000 healthcare, research and technical professionals in the University Professional and Technical Employees (UPTE) union, 40,000 service and patient care technical workers in American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 3299 and 25,000 nurses in the California Nurses Association (CNA).

The planned strike is the largest coordinated work stoppage in UC history, part of a growing nationwide rebellion of healthcare and public sector workers. From the mass walkouts of hospital staff in New Orleans and across Minnesota and Wisconsin, to strikes by nurses in Grand Blanc, Michigan, and the five-day Kaiser Permanente walkout earlier this year, workers are rising up against a system that subordinates healthcare to profit.

Everywhere, the conditions are the same. Healthcare workers confront chronic understaffing, collapsing real wages and impossible workloads that drive thousands out of the profession each year. At UC, AFSCME reports real wage losses of nearly 10 percent in recent years, alongside massive staff turnover and a growing exodus from the university's medical centers. Thousands are forced to commute hours to work because housing near UC campuses is unaffordable.

These struggles are not isolated or local. They express the growing recognition that the crisis in healthcare is rooted in the entire structure of American capitalism. Workers increasingly sense that the deterioration of hospitals, schools and public services is inseparable from the looting of society by the financial oligarchy and the diversion of trillions into war and corporate profits. They are striving to build a movement against inequality itself, a movement for the social right to healthcare and a livable existence.

The University of California system epitomizes these contradictions. It is not merely an employer but a central institution of the corporate-controlled political establishment. UC is bound by billions of dollars in defense and biotech contracts, deeply tied to Silicon Valley and Wall Street and actively involved in the suppression of social opposition, including the police crackdowns on Gaza protests since 2023. Under the control of the Democratic Party-dominated Board of Regents, UC functions as both a low-wage employer and an instrument of political repression.

On November 8, the UPTE-CWA Local 9119 leadership abruptly announced a tentative agreement with UC, reached through backroom mediation sessions. Both hailed it as a “hard-won victory” and praised their “constructive dialogue” and “shared commitment to employee welfare.”

In reality, the contract is a miserable sellout, made clear even by the union's own highlights. In it, they “boast” that the deal keeps health insurance rates the same for “most” plans, meaning it will increase for some. They also declare that paid time off and vacation time accrual will not be reduced for existing hires, implying it *will* be reduced for new hires. The contract includes a meager 18 percent general wage increase over four years. UPTE tries to inflate this figure in the highlights by lumping it together with annual wage progression.

This cynical language exposes the real function of the UPTE bureaucracy. While workers were preparing to strike, the union apparatus intervened to prevent a unified confrontation with UC management and the two big business parties behind it. The “dialogue” they celebrate is class collaboration under conditions in which UC and the forces behind it are waging a class war.

By pulling 21,000 workers off the picket lines, UPTE officials have weakened the position of the remaining 65,000 AFSCME and CNA members still fighting for improved wages and staffing. What was to have been a powerful,

united strike of 86,000 workers has been fractured, giving UC management and the Democratic Party the upper hand. Workers must be on guard against any efforts by the AFSCME and CNA leaders to follow suit and prevent the strike altogether.

Dividing the ranks was no accident. For over a year, UPTE deliberately delayed action, extending expired contracts and organizing only token one- or two-day “protest strikes” alongside AFSCME. Each of these isolated actions—in November 2024 and then again in February, April, May and July—was designed not to win anything but to dissipate anger and reinforce illusions in the union apparatus. The leadership repeatedly scheduled walkouts at the least disruptive times precisely to limit their impact.

While the ruling class, through Trump and both corporate parties, eliminates access to healthcare, education and other necessities of life, the unions talk of partnership and mutual understanding. Their “constructive dialogue” takes place as the capitalist state enacts mass deportations, suppresses dissent and funnels billions into war and corporate bailouts.

The current political situation underscores the impossibility of defending even the most basic social rights through such methods. The so-called government “shutdown” crisis was not a matter of bureaucratic gridlock but a weapon in the ruling class’s assault on the working class. To pay for military escalation abroad and rescue failing financial markets, the capitalist class must destroy every social program, privatize healthcare and break all forms of worker resistance.

The UPTE bureaucracy acts to suppress strikes, isolate workers and keep the movement confined within “labor relations” rather than allowing it to develop into a political struggle. They speak of “shared goals” with UC because they do share them: the defense of corporate profitability and the subordination of workers’ needs to the financial interests that dominate the university.

The same pattern is being repeated across the country. At Kaiser Permanente, the Alliance of Health Care Unions declared “victory” after a five-day strike, yet weeks later workers remain without a satisfactory contract. In every case, the union bureaucracies act to block a broader mobilization, sending workers back to work with empty promises while management imposes new attacks.

AFSCME and CNA have played identical roles at UC. AFSCME’s 40,000 service and patient care workers have gone more than a year without a ratified contract, while the CNA has confined nurses to symbolic protests. All these bureaucracies, including UPTE, are integrated into the AFL-CIO apparatus—a structure bound hand and foot to corporate management and the capitalist state.

If their struggle is not to be defeated, UC workers must

take the conduct of the fight into their own hands. Their immediate task is to form rank-and-file committees that are independent, democratic organizations controlled by workers themselves. These committees must reject the secret sellout agreement, demand the release of all contract terms and prepare for a unified, indefinite strike across all UC hospitals, laboratories and campuses.

The significance of these committees goes beyond the fight for a contract. They represent a new form of organization based on the independent initiative of the working class. Their purpose is to link UC workers with healthcare workers at Kaiser, in New Orleans, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan and beyond, as well as with autoworkers, teachers, logistics and tech workers and students.

This unity must be built on a political foundation. The fight for safe staffing, living wages and decent conditions is inseparable from the fight for socialism. It requires the expropriation of the healthcare giants, insurance conglomerates and pharmaceutical monopolies; the transformation of healthcare into a public service, not a profit engine. It requires the reorganization of the economy to meet human needs, not private wealth.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) provides the framework for such a movement. UC workers must link their fight with the growing resistance of the international working class, from the mass protests against genocide and dictatorship to the strikes against austerity and privatization.

The UC struggle has revealed both the immense potential power of the working class and the treachery of the bureaucratic apparatus that seeks to contain it. The betrayal by UPTE must mark a turning point. Workers must go on the offensive, taking up the fight not only for improved contracts but for the transformation of society as a whole.

Only through the independent mobilization of the working class, armed with a socialist program, can healthcare, education and all essential rights be secured for all, not for profit.

For more information on joining and building rank-and-file committees, fill out the form below.



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