

Tens of thousands of University of California healthcare workers carry out 2-day strike, as union bureaucrats disrupt their unity

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On Monday, 40,000 University of California (UC) service and patient-care technical workers launched a two-day strike at facilities across the state. The workers are members of AFSCME (American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees) Local 3299.

AFSCME members are among the lowest paid in the entire UC system. They have been on the job for 17 months without a contract, while talks between management and union officials have led nowhere.

“For the first time in 11 years I can’t even enroll in healthcare,” said Mary, a veteran kitchen worker at UC Irvine. “They take \$100, \$200 weekly out of your check—almost \$500 a month. I can’t afford that. If I get sick, I’ll just have to go to the ER and tell them to bill me. I have a husband, I have a son.”

Sarah said she was on strike because “healthcare caps and because for two years I have seen no raise, despite the rising cost of living.”

The names of interviewees in this article have been changed to protect their identities.

The strike is the latest in a series in the healthcare industry across the United States. Last week, 600 nurses struck for three days at the University Medical Center in New Orleans. Nurses in western Michigan have been locked in a bitter strike for over two months. A series of major strikes have also taken place over the past few years in California, including some of the largest US healthcare workforces in history.

The conditions are emerging for a powerful movement in defense of the right to healthcare, under conditions where access to and quality of healthcare has been declining for years in America’s for-profit public health system.

Such a movement must be independent of both

corporate parties. The UC struggle is a fight against the Democratic Party, which controls the UC Board of Regents. California governor Gavin Newsom sits on the Board as an ex-officio member. Before the strike, UC officials announced “contingency plans” to keep hospitals running and dismissed workers’ demands as “unreasonable” threats to UC’s “financial stability.” The same board presides over hundreds of millions in hidden surpluses, executive salaries padded into the millions, and vast real estate and investment portfolios.

In a statement yesterday, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees called for “the development of a network of rank-and-file committees in every industry and workplace, to bring the force of the working class to bear against the entrenched power of the oligarchy.” Pointing to the growth of strikes in healthcare and other industries, the IWA-RFC called for action in defense of “the social rights of the working class, including the right to healthcare, pensions, housing and education!”

This requires a rebellion against the pro-management union apparatus, which is disrupting and limiting these struggles as much as possible. “The apparatus must be abolished and replaced with new, democratic organizations, rank-and-file committees,” the IWA-RFC statement concluded.

The UC strike that took place this week involved less than half the total number of workers originally scheduled to strike. This would have included 21,000 healthcare, research and technical staff in the University Professional and Technical Employees (UPTe) union and 25,000 nurses in the California Nurses Association (CNA).

UPTe announced a sellout contract last week, pulling

its members out of the strike. The CNA followed two days later with its own back-room deal on Sunday, the day before the strike.

UPTE's own highlights make clear the deal is a betrayal. The union "boasts" 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.

Rena expressed outrage at the union officials. "I am not gonna get paid, but the union will get paid. There is nothing that will come from this strike, we still won't get our raise or contract!"

When asked what the union had done to organize a fight, Mary, the kitchen worker, responded, "Nothing. They're marching, and that's it. They don't tell us anything."

She spoke about the devastating impact of the for-profit response to the coronavirus pandemic. "Millions died under Trump's watch," she said. "I know people who died. One of our co-workers lost two brothers back to back. There were body bags everywhere. They sent us some money—did they think that would pacify us?"

"[Trump] divided the country like gangs. We've always had Democrats and Republicans but now they are like gangs, like the Bloods and the Crips. He freed the January 6 people but didn't even comment when those officials in Minnesota [referring to state representative Melissa Hortman and her husband] were killed."

She also spoke in defense of immigrant patients, many of whom are terrified to seek medical attention for fear of deportation. "People come over here to have a better life for their family, or to get a better education. We welcome them here. That's what America is known for. It is a melting pot."

In spite of the last minute sellouts, many UPTE and CNA members still took to the picket lines this week in solidarity. A certified nursing assistant joined the picket line Tuesday at UCSC Hillcrest in San Diego. When asked about the UPTE and CNA contracts, he said, "I think we should all be involved in negotiations."

Another nurse on the picket line in San Diego

explained: "We are here trying to get a livable wage. People have to work multiple jobs to pay rent. ... They treat us like we're inferior." She said the conditions are so bad that "We have people in the ER sleeping in hospital hallways."

Jeannie and Graciela, both UPTE members, participated on their own time. "We were all supposed to be out here together—three unions, one strike," they explained. "But they gave UPTE our contract first, then CNA's over the weekend. That left AFSCME alone. So we came on our lunch hour to support them."

They made clear that their tentative agreement solves nothing.

"Wages haven't kept up with inflation. Our contract doesn't catch us up either. Everything is going up—postal workers, auto workers, Starbucks workers are fighting for the same thing."

The two-day strike has indicated the potential power of the working class. But to activate this potential, workers must build rank-and-file committees in every UC workplace, independent of the unions and both big business parties, and united with workers in healthcare, education, logistics, manufacturing and beyond.



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