

42,000 University of California workers prepare to strike

Marc Wells
20 April 2026

Around 42,000 University of California system employees with the AFSCME union (American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees) are preparing for an open-ended strike beginning May 14. These include the lowest-paid layers of the UC workforce, including custodians, food service workers, security personnel, medical assistants, MRI technicians and respiratory therapists.

Their contracts expired in two phases, with patient care technical workers losing their agreement on July 31, 2024, followed by service workers on October 31 of the same year. Since then, the union has kept them on the job without a new deal and called five short-term strikes, carefully limited in scope and duration.

Now, an indefinite strike has been authorized. While this is a sign the UC workers have had enough, the outcome of the struggle depends upon the assertion of control by the rank and file over the struggle, independent and in opposition to the apparatus.

This struggle is unfolding amid a broader international escalation of class conflict. In the United States, workers are moving against austerity, attacks on democratic rights and the diversion of vast social resources toward war by the Trump administration.

The University of California's latest contract offer has been cynically promoted as "historic." In reality, it is a carefully constructed fraud. The headline claim of 32.3 percent "total pay growth" is padded with previously agreed increases and stretched over years, amounting to a real pay cut after inflation. It does nothing to address the fundamental reality that UC employees cannot afford to live anywhere near the campuses they serve.

The touted \$25 minimum wage is equally deceptive. It formalizes a wage floor that remains far below what is required in California's major metropolitan areas.

For many workers, rent alone consumes the bulk of their income. The addition of a one-time \$1,000 bonus is an insult. It vanishes instantly under the weight of basic expenses like housing, food and transportation.

On healthcare, the proposal is even worse. By tying premiums to a percentage, it guarantees workers will pay more every year as costs rise. Small stipends and cherry-picked "low premium" examples do not change the basic structure, which steadily shifts costs onto workers. In practice, it amounts to a wage cut.

At the same time, the university continues to push for 401(k) retirement schemes that shift risks onto workers while reducing its long-term obligations. Chronic understaffing has become institutionalized, with hiring freezes and high vacancy rates used to cut costs.

Employees are sleeping in their cars, cycling through shelters or enduring punishing commutes of two to three hours each way. Entire sections of the workforce are effectively excluded from the communities in which they work. In cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco and San Diego, living near one's workplace is not merely difficult, it is impossible.

The conditions facing UC workers are mirrored in the student population. Housing insecurity is widespread, with one in 13 UC students experiencing homelessness or unstable living conditions. The same economic pressures that drive workers into poverty are shaping the lives of the next generation.

Behind this stands the political establishment in California, the richest state in the country. The Democratic Party, which dominates the state and oversees the UC system, bears direct responsibility for this social disaster, carrying out austerity at the state and local levels.

However, AFSCME's response is also vague. Its calls for a "living wage," equity adjustments and

limited subsidies do not challenge the underlying framework. The union bureaucracy's role is not to mobilize workers against austerity but to contain and manage their opposition.

The pattern is well established. The 2014 contract followed a 96 percent strike authorization vote. Rather than escalate the struggle, the union canceled planned strike action and accepted a concessionary deal, including increased pension contributions and inadequate wage increases.

The 2020 agreement was even more revealing. Workers remained without a contract for nearly three years. During this period, the union staged a series of isolated, one-day strikes designed to dissipate anger. Ultimately, it pushed through a deal that failed to address outsourcing, provided no genuine cost-of-living adjustments and left workers paying more for healthcare and pensions. These betrayals laid the groundwork for the current crisis.

As a measure of the union bureaucracy's nervousness over rising rank-and-file anger, unions increasingly rely on legalistic ULP (Unfair Labor Practice) procedures and controlled "open-ended" strike calls to contain or shut down struggles as they develop, sometimes even at the last moment.

The union bureaucracy is working more openly to disrupt the class struggle as conditions for it are becoming more and more favorable. Last Tuesday in Los Angeles, teachers and school workers were blocked from carrying out a joint strike, instead confronting them with a last-minute deal that achieved none of their demands. Friday that same week, the Service Employees International Union canceled a strike of 34,000 doormen and other building workers in New York City.

These strikes would have involved a combined 114,000 workers in the two largest cities in America. It goes without saying that they would have had a galvanizing impact on workers around the country and even the world.

Also at the University of California, the United Auto Workers pushed through a contract for tens of thousands of graduate student workers without allowing sufficient time to review its terms, effectively splitting the AFSCME workers from one of their most powerful allies. And last November, UPTE (University Professional and Technical Employees) preemptively

undermined the largest coordinated UC strike in decades.

This reflects the social position of the union bureaucracy itself. Integrated into corporate and political structures, it functions to contain workers, not to advance the interests of the rank and file.

The authorization of an open-ended strike reflects a growing recognition that the status quo is untenable. But the decisive question is leadership, who directs the struggle and in whose interests.

The struggle cannot remain subordinated to the union apparatus or the political establishment. Workers must organize independently through rank-and-file committees, outside bureaucratic control, to democratically determine demands, coordinate across sectors and unite with students and broader layers of workers in a political struggle against the profit system as a whole. These committees would counter the divisions imposed by the unions and assert that those who do the work must decide its conditions.

The issues extend beyond wages to the allocation of social resources. While billions fund war and repression, workers' needs are ignored. The UC strike must become part of a wider struggle against austerity and inequality, recognizing that the problem is not individual administrators but a system prioritizing profit over human need.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact