

42,000 UC healthcare and service workers set to strike, as AFSCME and management near agreement: Build rank-and-file committees now!

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The 42,000 University of California workers, including custodians, food service workers, security personnel, medical assistants, MRI technicians and respiratory therapists, stand on the verge of an open-ended strike set to begin Thursday. Officials from the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 3299 are working to prevent it with “last ditch” negotiations set for Wednesday with precisely that purpose.

The impending action takes place as opposition grows across industries to wartime inflation, AI-driven job cuts and worsening conditions on the job. The Transport Workers Union Local 100 contract covering more than 40,000 New York City subway and bus workers expires on May 15. On May 16, the cooling-off period ends for 3,500 Long Island Rail Road workers in five unions, leaving them legally free to strike. These LIRR workers have twice been blocked from striking by union officials, who appealed to Trump to appoint a Presidential Emergency Board, a maneuver that bought eight months of delay and delivered nothing.

A custodian sleeping in her car near UC San Diego and a New York City transit worker paying half of his wage for a New York apartment are fighting the same enemy. The conditions for a unified fightback have never been more favorable. The question is whether workers can seize the moment, and that requires taking the struggle out of the hands of the labor bureaucracy and preparing for a political confrontation with the Democrats, from California Governor Gavin Newsom and the University of California Board of Regents to

officials on the local level.

The terms of the UC dispute make the stakes concrete. Both sides have accepted a \$25-per-hour minimum wage floor. According to MIT’s Living Wage Calculator, a single California adult with one child requires at least \$53.54 per hour. The entire negotiation is conducted at roughly half the level workers need to live in California’s major cities.

This is the ceiling both institutions agreed upon before a single picket line formed, while \$10 billion sits in UC’s unrestricted reserves, produced by the labor of the workers who will walk those lines.

The claim that there is “no money” obscures who controls the budget and in whose interests it is administered. The University of California is not simply a public employer. It is an institution of the California Democratic Party establishment: its regents appointed by Democratic governors, its budget administered by Democratic politicians.

The Board of Regents includes corporate executives, real estate investors, and architects of privatization across California’s public sector. When UC management dismisses affordable housing as a “non-mandatory bargaining item,” that is a political and class choice made by administrators answerable to this apparatus.

This assault on the campus workforce did not begin with Trump. California Democrats have imposed years of underfunding, tuition hikes and privatization on the UC system. This has resulted in the creation of a mass of low-wage workers, who cannot afford to live near the institutions they sustain.

Trump's war in Iran has now driven gas prices to more than \$6 a gallon in cities like Los Angeles and threatens to accelerate inflation further. His proposed \$1.5 trillion military budget dwarfs any conceivable expenditure on workers' wages or public services. American billionaires' wealth has surged to \$8.4 trillion. Against that backdrop, the argument that UC's \$10 billion in reserves cannot fund a living wage for its lowest-paid workers is an obscenity.

AFSCME's record at UC is a consistent pattern. In 2014, a 96 percent strike authorization vote was used to cancel planned action and accept a concessionary deal. In 2020, after nearly three years without a contract and a series of contained one-day strikes designed to dissipate anger, the union imposed an agreement that failed to address outsourcing and left workers paying more for healthcare. Five limited strikes since October 2024 have followed the same script: each calibrated to demonstrate apparatus control, not to win.

The Unfair Labor Practice (ULP) framework now being deployed is a further mechanism of containment. ULP procedures shift the struggle from the shop floor into bureaucratic legal channels, replacing workers' democratic control with decisions by labor attorneys, and allow officials to declare "victory" once legal issues are settled, regardless of whether workers' conditions have changed. Workers should understand it clearly: A ULP "win" that leaves them sleeping in their cars is not a win.

A broader pattern of the unions' suppression of the class struggle is unmistakable. In Los Angeles, 77,000 teachers and school workers were blocked from the first simultaneous walkout of all school employees in the district's history, confronted with a last-minute deal that left layoffs fully on the agenda. The United Auto Workers shut down a struggle by 40,000 UC academic workers two months ago. None of these were miscalculations. The better the conditions for class struggle, the more openly the apparatus moves to extinguish it.

The open-ended strike authorization shows real determination. But workers must not allow the bureaucracy to determine what happens next.

Rank-and-file committees must be built so that workers have an organizational form independent of the apparatus that can coordinate across campuses, communicate directly among themselves and make

democratic decisions. No agreement should be accepted or announced without the full membership's review and time to discuss it. When an official announces a "breakthrough" at 2:00 a.m. after a closed-door session, workers should treat it as a warning sign. That is exactly what happened to the LAUSD school workers.

A rank-and-file committee can connect a food service worker at UC Davis to the transit worker facing a May 15 deadline in New York, to the Nexteer worker in Saginaw, to the Dana worker whose safety conditions have been documented and suppressed for years.

This is what the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) is fighting to build: instruments of struggle capable of asserting workers' democratic control over a fight the apparatus is racing to close down.

The \$10 billion in UC's unrestricted reserves was produced by the labor of the workers going on strike Thursday. The question of who controls that wealth is not a bargaining question. It is a political question: Which class holds power in society? Answering it requires the independent mobilization of workers across campuses and sectors, against the Democratic Party establishment that controls the Regents and the union bureaucracy it deploys to manage their discontent. The resources exist. The determination exists. What is needed now is the organization to act on it.

Are you a UC worker preparing to strike? Fill out the form below to get help building a rank-and-file committee at your campus.



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