

Anger spreads after strike by 42,000 UC California workers canceled in the middle of the night

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42,000 University of California healthcare and service workers were set to begin a historic open-ended strike on Thursday, May 14. Custodians, patient care technicians, respiratory therapists, food service workers and others had voted overwhelmingly to strike against poverty wages, skyrocketing housing costs and the inadequate healthcare. Workers in Local 3299 have been kept on the job without a contract since 2024.

Then in the dead of night, the strike was abruptly called off at approximately 1:26 am Thursday morning, and workers were ordered to report to work only hours later. The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 3299 announced it reached a tentative agreement behind closed doors with the University of California administration.

This is the latest in a series of sellouts by union bureaucrats across the country. In particular, it is almost identical to the way that SEIU blocked a district-wide strike of 77,000 Los Angeles public school workers in April with only hours to go before their strike deadline, following all-night talks involving LA mayor Karen Bass. The same week, SEIU canceled a strike of 34,000 building workers in New York City shortly before it was set to begin.

Also at the UC system, the United Auto Workers (UAW) suppressed a 93.3 percent strike mandate by 40,000 academic workers after their contract expired in March, ultimately pushing through a ratified agreement without ever allowing a strike.

The union bureaucracy is deliberately sabotaging workers in order to prevent a struggle which would inevitably develop into a broader fight which would threaten their ties to management and the Democratic Party. A general rule is emerging: The more favorable the objective conditions for a struggle, the more shamelessly the bureaucracy acts to disrupt and dissipate workers' momentum.

Workers should not consider themselves bound to a deal made in flagrant violation of their will and reached when

they were still asleep. To override this betrayal, workers must organize rank-and-file committees at every campus and UC facility, excluding union officials, to mobilize workers to vote down the deal and prepare a genuine struggle, this time under workers' control.

The full tentative agreement has not been released to the membership, underscoring the undemocratic character of the maneuver. Voting will begin as soon as Monday, leaving little to no time to read the full text of the deal, that is if it is even circulated by then. So far, workers have only been provided the so-called "highlights" from the union apparatus.

AFSCME boasts, "We Won" on its website, claiming that "historic wins" were obtained, but even the highlights point instead to a historic sellout. The agreement includes a \$1,500 lump-sum payment, a 5 percent wage increase retroactive to 2025 and promises to "increase minimum wage to \$25 in 2025, \$26.50 in 2026, reaching \$30.10 by April 2029."

In fact, administrators had already agreed to a 5 percent pay increase and \$25 starting pay. But the claim that this means "livable wages" is an outright lie. According to Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Living Wage Calculator, a single adult in California with one child needs to earn at least \$53.54 per hour to make ends meet. Moreover, because the wage increase is only retroactive to 2025, this means workers will get no wage increases for the final months of 2024, when the last contract expired.

The next four years would see base wage increases of 6 percent in 2026, 5 percent in 2027 and 4 percent each in 2028 and 2029, for a total of 24 percent over the five-year contract. This is only 6 percent better than the 18 percent over five years from UC's "last, best and final offer." In 2024, AFSCME's initial demand was for 25 percent over *three years*.

AFSCME likewise claims it has secured "affordable healthcare," but in fact the deal allows for rate increases of either 7.5 percent or 5 percent per year, depending on the

plan. They claim it includes “safe staffing,” but there are no detailed enforcement mechanisms, no concrete staffing ratios and no binding prohibitions on layoffs or outsourcing.

But worst of all, the final deal omits entirely the original demand for \$25,000 in housing subsidies per employee. This is a crucial issue given that the spiraling cost of living crisis in California has left some workers living in their cars. Its absence, combined with healthcare cost increases, likely more than offsets the modest concessions management gave on wages.

AFSCME officials never intended to wage a genuine struggle against the financial interests of the UC Regents, the Democratic Party establishment or the capitalist system which subordinates healthcare and education to profit. Their function is not to mobilize workers independently but to contain and suppress opposition within safe channels acceptable to management and the state.

On AFSCME local 3299’s Instagram page, workers were furious. “What happened to all that talk about retro pay? The housing? We won’t stop until we win?” asked one worker, throwing the union’s rhetoric back in its face.

Another wrote: “This is disheartening and disappointing. I really thought we would get the housing funds. The talking they did was very misleading. They made it seem like they would not fold unless they gave us the housing funds.”

A third worker demanded: “Where is the retro pay? Just another big error right? Inflation wasn’t a worry I guess for the ones working for y’all!!!”

World Socialist Web Site reporters were on the ground speaking to workers at UC Irvine Thursday morning following the announcement.

Andrew, a groundskeeper at UC Irvine with nine years on the job, explained that “Most of the workers are working two jobs,” he said. “You can’t make it on one. Maybe they’ll do another landscaping job after this.” Compounding this is the struggle to afford housing. “Last year, there were actually some people living out of their cars because they could not afford the rent,” Andrew said. “You know, you’re working full-time at a university, and you’re living out of your car?”

Andrew explained to WSWS reporters, “Whenever they do give us a raise, it’s really not a raise because it’s already sucked up by the insurance cost and parking.” UC workers are forced to pay nearly \$1,000 annually for parking while healthcare costs continue rising. When a WSWS reporter described the agreement as effectively a “net-zero contract,” Andrew replied, “It balances out somewhere. It balances out for them. For them. Not for us.”

Adolfo, a groundskeeper with 19 years at UC Irvine, said “The issue of the pay is very important because everything is going up and up, year after year. The price of gasoline is

rising. Food as well. Actually, the price of everything is going up.” Adolfo noted that many work second or third jobs, “Yes. It’s necessary. It’s just not enough money. The rent for one apartment now is \$3,000. That’s only for the apartment. Then you have to pay for food, utilities, phones, cars, tires, gasoline. And I have children.” With each contract, he noted, “The workers are poorer.”

Another groundskeeper with nearly 30 years at UC Irvine told WSWS reporters he is still making only \$25 an hour.

The first step for workers is to organize rank-and-file committees against the sham ratification process. They should demand the full tentative agreement be released immediately, with adequate time for workers to read and discuss it before a vote. Workers must impose rank-and-file oversight of the balloting to ensure its integrity.

The struggle must be resumed under workers’ control. AFSCME members should organize meetings to decide on their own non-negotiable demands and prepare the ground for mass action to win them, with or without the permission of the union apparatus.

This struggle must be based on a strategy of class struggle. Workers are being told there is “no money” for housing, staffing or wages while hundreds of billions are funneled into criminal wars. Trump recently declared with utter contempt that he does not think “even a little bit” about the economic impact of the war on tens of millions of Americans.

But the attack on the working class is bipartisan. The Democrats who run California, and who also make up the UC Regents, have overseen brutal austerity, while refusing to do anything to hold Trump accountable in the slightest for his fascist policies.

The struggle is not simply against the UC administration but against an entire political and economic system that subordinates human need to private profit.



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