

More than 50,000 UC workers on strike

For a political movement of the entire working class against inequality and capitalism!

By David Moore
9 May 2018

David Moore is the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for senate in the California June 5 mid-term elections. You can find out more and get involved in the campaign at socialequality.com/2018.

Tens of thousands of service workers at the University of California (UC) are concluding their three-day strike against deteriorating pay and conditions today.

The widespread support for the strike of services workers, including from nurses and technical workers who have engaged in sympathy strikes, is part of a growing wave of opposition from workers throughout the United States and internationally. However, the unions involved have worked to limit and contain the struggle and ensure its defeat.

In April, the UC system unilaterally imposed a contract on service workers that increased the retirement age by five years, included a paltry two percent wage increase, and allowed the university to outsource more jobs as well as raise health care premiums.

The UC system is the state's third largest employer, and the conditions there are immediately familiar to workers across the country. Just in the past two months there have been strikes of public school teachers and support staff in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona.

In each of these strikes, the role of the unions—the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association—was to smother opposition and shut it down. The strikes were not initiated by the unions, but by rank-and-file teachers. The unions intervened to end the strikes and prevent them from

developing into a nationwide movement against the Democratic and Republican parties and the capitalist system.

The teachers unions were operating under the principle articulated by a lawyer for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) in the pending case of *Janus vs. AFSCME* on union agency fees: “Union security is the tradeoff for no strikes.” The AFSCME lawyer was telling the high court justices: You need us, because without us there will be “an untold specter of labor unrest throughout the country.”

The main union involved in the UC strike is AFSCME, and it—along with the University Professional and Technical Employees and California Nurses Association—is putting this statement into practice. The three-day strike is intended to let off steam, while doing nothing to resolve the conditions facing service and other workers in the UC system.

AFSCME has a long history of calling short-term strikes and making empty strike threats to demoralize members and force through sellout contracts. In 2014, it cancelled planned strikes of two different sections of workers and imposed contracts that included increases in pension contributions from workers. In this strike, AFSCME is seeking to block widespread opposition to the bipartisan attack on public education and workers compensation by focusing almost entirely on racial and gender pay discrepancies that they claim can be fixed at the university level.

The unions want to prevent any discussion of the political background to the conditions facing UC

workers. Particularly since the 2008 economic crisis, the ruling class and its two parties have slashed social spending while cutting taxes for corporations and the rich. Within California, the UC system's budget has been cut by Democratic Governor Jerry Brown and the former Republican Governor Schwarzenegger.

In 2017 the state of California provided nearly two-thirds less in per pupil funding than it did in 1990, from \$19,100 down to \$7,160, after inflation. State funding now only accounts for roughly 10 percent of the UC budget. More than three times that amount comes from UC-run medical centers.

Those cuts have increasingly shaped every aspect of work and study in the UC system. Custodians, groundskeepers and office staff workers are overworked, and their departments are understaffed. University lecturers find themselves on food stamps with no prospect of advancement. Students have seen their tuition and debts soar.

As part of the UC's transformation from being funded by the state to making profits from medical and research businesses, well-heeled administrators were brought in. Between 2005 and 2015, the total payroll cost for the top 10 percent of UC wages grew from 22 to 31 percent, while that of the bottom 50 percent dropped from 24 to 22 percent.

UC workers in the medical centers are doubly squeezed by the attacks on health care that were carried out under the Affordable Care Act (ACA), or Obamacare. Hailed by the unions and Democrats as a great reform, the ACA has provided record profits to insurance companies while forcing low-income workers to ration their care in overpriced plans with prohibitively high deductibles and co-pays.

Within the medical centers and hospitals, health care workers have been subjected to particularly sharp understaffing and speedup.

These attacks on the working class have been combined with tax breaks, bailouts and giveaways to the ultra-rich. Nationwide, the three richest billionaires have as much wealth as the poorest half of Americans combined. This immense social gulf grew precipitously under the Obama administration and continues to accelerate with the Trump tax cuts.

Both parties of big business have worked closely to funnel money from the working class to the rich. While being run by Democrats from top to bottom, California

has grown to be the fourth most unequal state in the US, with the largest number of billionaires and the largest homeless population. When the cost of living is taken into account, California has the highest poverty rate in the country, at just over 20 percent.

The unions promote the lie that Democrats are allies of workers. Yet the Democrats voted for a record \$700 billion military budget, found room in the budget for Trump's border wall and bailed out the banks in 2008, but claim there is no money for education, health care and retirement.

The three-day strike will resolve nothing. I call on UC workers to form rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to unite their fight for wages and benefits with the struggles of the entire working class against inequality and war. The conditions facing striking workers are the same as those facing teachers, auto workers, Amazon workers, telecommunication workers, and all sections of the working class—in the United States and internationally.

The building of rank-and-file factory and workplace committees must be connected to a political counteroffensive against the two big-business parties and the entire capitalist system. The resources exist to ensure everyone the right to a high-paying job, quality health care and a secure retirement. The problem is capitalism, a social and economic system based on the exploitation of the working class to secure the profits of the ruling class.

I urge all workers who agree with this program to support the SEP campaign in the 2018 elections and join and build the Socialist Equality Party.

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