

University of California service and patient care technicians on one-day strike

By Marc Wells
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University of California's 25,000 service and patient care technicians are on strike today, for the fourth time in less than a year. The action is being organized by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 3299 and the University Professional and Technical Employees—Communications Workers of America (UPTE-CWA) Local 9119. Only three weeks ago, a similar strike was organized by the same unions.

Last May, 53,000 service workers throughout the UC system walked out on a three-day strike. Last October, following a 96 percent strike vote, 25,000 workers mobilized for another three-day strike. Last month, the strike was reduced to one day.

The strike includes a wide spectrum of workers: patient care assistants, therapists, operating room specialists, respiratory pharmacy and hospital lab technicians, phlebotomists, operating room specialists, social workers, nuclear medicine technologists and other health care, research support and technical employees. These workers play a crucial role in the healthcare and well-being of patients and their families. Striking workers include custodians, food service workers, shuttle drivers and security officers.

For months, these workers have voiced their grievances: wages are too low to keep up with increasing living costs, secure employment is being replaced by outsourcing and temporary labor thereby reducing benefits, and the UC Regents are seeking to transform workers' retirement benefits into a 401(k)-style pension plan for the purpose of reducing costs.

Additionally, working conditions are becoming progressively more dangerous, resulting in an increase in the rate of injuries, given the heavier workload. In the last several years, countless reports by workers

point to working conditions that are not only unfavorable to employees, but expose patients to grave peril.

Temporary and subcontracted workers often replace retiring personnel. They are thrown into delicate medical situations with inadequate training. Judy McKeever, a respiratory therapist at the UC San Francisco Medical Center, made the point that she "really fear[s] for the safety of the patients. You have a brand new grad, they get a short orientation and they're put out on their own." She further commented that career workers are left with the burden of training temps and subs, which leads to "burn-out" due to stress.

The casualization of crucial work such as that of medical technicians is primarily the result of UC Regents' strategy of reducing labor costs. Temporary and subcontracted workers are often remunerated less than half the pay of UC employees. Their health benefits, if any, are marginal, and their jobs are precarious, vulnerable to firing for any reason, including for calling in sick.

In a deeper sense, however, this is the result of an entire socio-economic system that fails to invest adequate resources into the satisfaction of fundamental social needs, while allocating unlimited resources to war, the repression of immigrants and accumulation of wealth by the rich.

The UC has offered an insulting three percent increase, which does not even keep up with the rate of inflation. The unions' demand for an eight percent increase would do nothing to ameliorate the living conditions of these workers, especially when new contracts inevitably include other provisions that offset modest raises, such as increased health care costs or reduced benefits.

The university has sought to intimidate workers by demonizing their strike action by claiming they are endangering patients. This turns reality on its head: workers are not responsible for allocating insufficient resources to crucial patient care, the university and the ruling class are.

Conditions in the university system in California expose the role of the Democratic Party, which has dominated the state's politics and has proceeded year after year to undermine what was once a more accessible educational system, which provided free higher education to all.

The unions have been fully complicit in this process. Their unconditional support for the Democratic Party has been aimed at channeling opposition among workers behind the main party of the ruling class in California.

Moreover, the unions have attempted to divert the attention of workers from the main issues and legitimate grievances involved in the strike. AFSCME has now shifted the focus of the strike action to a complaint it filed against the UC, which alleges a coordinated effort by the university to intimidate workers, sabotage strike activity and push employees to drop their union membership. The strike is being reduced therefore to a question of unfair labor practices.

The question of dues is the union's most urgent concern. With 1.3 million members nationwide, AFSCME counts on hundreds of millions of dollars in dues annually. AFSCME leaders rely on this monetary base for their 6-digit annual salaries, from executive director Henry Garrido (\$341,778) to assistant executive director Adam Acosta (\$127,457).

The UC and the union are preparing to agree on a settlement based on the university's demands. The Regents would cease their "unfair labor practices" while the union would declare it a victory.

The strategy of the union is aimed not at improving workers' social position, but at subordinating them to the dictates of the UC administration. This is why they have called a series of limited, three-day or even one-day strikes, aimed at isolating UC workers and preventing a serious struggle.

A winning strategy for workers must begin with a clear understanding that every section of the working class in the US and worldwide is coming into conflict

with the capitalist system and its defenders. The most prominent feature of social life in the last year and a half has been the resurgence of the class struggle.

To spearhead this process, teachers in many states, from West Virginia to Arizona, from Oklahoma to California, as well as countless countries, from the UK to France to Poland, have launched strikes that have developed in opposition to the unions. The unions have sought to shut down every strike, preventing it from expanding to other sections of the working class.

The same is happening with UC workers. Instead of seeking solidarity from teachers and students, who in recent days have been on major strikes in Los Angeles and Oakland, the union makes sure a toothless one-day strike will occur at a time that no other similar action is taking place.

The World Socialist Web Site urges UC workers to form rank-and-file committees to take control of the strike and develop it into a serious struggle in defense of their interests and those of their patients. Such efforts inevitably place workers alongside their brothers and sisters around the world in a fight against the root of the problem, the capitalist system.

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