

UC Service Worker Strike Appears Imminent

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PEJ News: Over 7,300 service workers are bracing for a strike against the University of California, as negotiations between the AFSCME Local 3299 and University appear to be heading towards an impasse.

After union members on nine campuses voted 92% statewide to authorize a strike on March 17, 2005, the Bargaining Committee and UC are participating in a state-mandated "fact-finding process." This process, which is estimated to conclude in late March, is followed by a ten-day renegotiation period.

"If we don't settle within that ten days, the Union is free to strike," says Paul Worthman, Statewide Negotiator for AFSCME Local 3299 (www.afscme3299.org). Worthman has been an organizer with various unions for 30 years.

"And it doesn't look good," he adds, regarding the prospect of reaching middle ground with the University who he says is not showing willingness to "move."

Meanwhile, two UC Irvine Medical Center workers claim to have been wrongly harassed for wearing buttons and posting flyers supporting the strike on March 10, 2005, according to an affidavit obtained by the present columnist.

"We are planning to file charges," UC Irvine campus organizer, Roxanna Guevara, says, adding such harassment is illegal.

"In support of our AFSCME workers, several of us were proud to wear the red pin in their support and post the flyers. Our supervisor became aware and made a statement that until she found out what the "rules" were, that we would not be able to post the flyers and keep them in sight," wrote Janette Carbone, a Physician's Assistant, in an affidavit.

"Dannie Garber and I immediately stated that it was our right to support those workers..." Janette continued. "Our office employees continued to wear the pin in support and have not heard any issues since, but the flyer is not posted in our office," she said.

Guevara also claims that workers have been told by their UC managers that "They don't have to

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go to the picket line," which she claims is an effort to mislead workers.

Major contract issues being debated include: guaranteed wage increases, possibilities for advancement, not firing workers for being absent due to sickness, the use of uniforms made in overseas sweatshops, and over 30 other issues, Worthman explained in a telephone interview.

The biggest issue is the debate over whether there should be guaranteed wage increases. "The University wants any raises to be conditional upon the Governor and the Legislature having money specifically allocated to the University for salary staff increases," said Worthman.

Worthman says, however, that the University's position is bunk, claiming the University gets money from a number of other sources including auxiliary enterprises, student fees, and overhead received in research grants.

The University also always appears to be able to find the money for new buildings and salary bonuses, he adds.

"However, less than one-fourth of the workers' current salaries come from state money [on average]," he says. "Auxiliary operations like the Medical Center, Parking, Dining Halls, Transportation, none of these get state funding and they rely on their own revenues."

"One thing that particularly perturbs our Bargaining Committee is that almost every other union and non-union group-the TA's [teaching assistants], the faculty, the police, the nurses, the research and technical staff-have all gotten raises out of University funding," said Worthman. "The University is not consistent in the people they refuse to guarantee raises to. It's mostly the low-paid service workers, which are mostly people of color."

"I think they've been singled out because the University, high officials have said publicly, they simply don't believe the work these people do is important. The people who clean the toilets and serve the food are not a priority," Worthman explained.

"The University doesn't offer it because they haven't been made to feel they have to," Worthman says, adding, "It's difficult [for these workers] to take the time to rally and demonstrate, and it's very scary. I have a tremendous amount of respect for people who are scared of retribution. Standing up to people who write your evaluations is a real act of courage."

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Another major issue, Worthman says, is a "chance to advance." "Trying to see an opportunity to have a career in the University, not simply dead-end jobs. If there are vacancies in management, we want that the jobs would go to qualified internal candidates instead of going outside and the University just won't do it."

UC service workers make significantly less than workers in comparable jobs at other state institutions, including 15% less than those at Cal State Universities, and 26% less than those at Community Colleges, according to a February 2005 report by National Economic Development and Law Center (www.nedlc.org). The report is available for viewing without registration at the AFSCME website: <http://www.afscme3299.org/reportonucwoakerpoverty1/>.

Francisco Arellano, 47, a worker in the Housekeeping Department, said, "They always say, well it's the market. We don't care about the market. I've been working at UCI for 22 years." Arellano is a member of the AFSCME service workers union and was President of the UC Irvine local [when campuses had their own locals] from 1990-1999.

"In 1983 when I started, I was making \$5.38. As President of the UCI Local, I bargained five times with the University. From 1983 until now, the people have had only four raises, that's it, in 22 years," Arellano says.

"Most of my coworkers have two jobs to make it because they can't make it with one job. They start at 5 am and work until 2 pm and then go to a second job," Arellano added.

Arellano describes the plight of his friend, another worker, who he says makes \$12.96 an hour after working at UCI for 36 years. Of his friend, Arellano says, "It's not fair. He should make \$18 to \$20 an hour, because he already spent his life there."

"The vote was a really good decision," Arellano continued. "Everybody thinks it's not fair the real low money we're making. We really need some changes, you know. Santa Ana School District starts at \$15.00 an hour, for the same jobs. I have four kids; two in college and two in high school. How can I pay tuition, rent, food, health care, and everything with that kind of money? There's no way!"

UC service workers' wages are not sufficient to cover the bare minimum costs of raising a family, according to the NEDLC report. This finding is based on a "Self-sufficiency standard" based on \$182 per month on food, for instance. So when the authors refer to "bare-bones costs," they really mean what they say.

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In Orange County, California, for instance, the NEDLC estimates \$42,902 is needed per year for a single adult and preschooler to afford the cost of living, whereas a UC Irvine food service worker makes \$14,693/year on average.

"UC food service workers earn wages low enough to qualify for up to nine major publicly-funded welfare benefit programs, depending on the worker's county, family size, and age of children," the report continues. "A food service worker who is a single parent with one preschool-age child earns low enough to meet income eligibility requirements for the following benefits..." it says, referring to Medi-Cal, housing subsidies, free or reduced lunch for school-age children, low-income telephone subsidy, and low-income home energy assistance.

Single parent food service workers at UC Irvine, UC San Diego, and UCLA, qualify for food stamps as well, the report says.

Union officials say the provision of these public benefits to underpaid state employees ends up costing the state money anyway.

"The University, they always try to divide the union. Last year, they offered to the people, a 1.5% raise just to the hospital employees, not to the campus employees," said Arellano.

"And they say, we have money, but only for hospital people. We decided not to accept it. You have to give the money to everybody. We know they do that because they want to make us fight each other," Arellano continued.

Elaine Cover, an AFSCME worker in patient care-whose unit within the union recently had a contract struggle with UC only one year ago-came to a recent rally in Irvine, California, to support her fellow workers in the service unit.

"I've worked at UCI just shy of 5 years," Cover said. "I make just under \$14. I'm here supporting the service members of my union because they're as deserving of the contract we got last year, if not better."

"Right now there are so many indifferences going on over there at UCI with CEO bonuses," Cover said. "And there are people in the service unit-people who've started four years after I did-making more than me. They won't give us raises but they'll bring new people in at higher wages."

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UC gave its top medical executives over \$2.4 million in bonuses in October 2004, according to a press statement by AFSCME.

"The employees are showing a lot of dedication to the company, but the company is not giving us a lot of dedication in return," Cover added.

"Look at all the benefits we have because we're fighting as a union," said Arellano. "Union people and UCI have been fighting every year and everything we have is because of fighting," he continued.

Matthew Cardinale is a freelance writer, advocate, and graduate student at UC Irvine in sociology and democracy studies. He may be reached at mcardina@uci.edu.