UPTE members honor picket lines

UC service workers strike; win contract less than one week later

S
ervice workers at UC campuses, medical centers and labs systemwide walked off the job on April 14 in frustration at the University’s unfair labor practices. Members of other UC unions, including UPTE-CWA, joined them on the picket lines to call for fair wages and improved working conditions. On April 19 – just five days later – negotiators reached tentative agreement on a three-year contract, providing significant wage increases and other items. On October 1, 2005, service workers will receive a 3 percent wage increase, as well as a 4 percent raise in the third year of the contract.

UC’s 7,300 service workers are represented by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, Local 3299. The food service workers, custodians, transportation workers and others on the nine UC campuses and five medical centers have not had a raise in two years. The new contract will establish a $9 per hour minimum wage for all service workers, affecting some six hundred mostly food service workers, who have been living in poverty.

Custodial workers will receive an additional 1% equity increase, as will employees in some other job classifications which are now paid below market. If the state appropriates less funding than is required for the raises and UC does not make up the difference from other funding sources, the contract allows service workers to strike.

In addition, the contract includes $250 in lump sum retroactive pay, higher shift differential pay, a minimum of one free meal per shift for food service workers, 24 hours of paid educational leave per year, and better seniority language for promotions and layoffs. It also eliminates attendance policy language, so UC can no longer penalize workers for legitimate use of sick leave.

UC unions support strike

Other unions at UC supported the AFSCME strike, including UPTE-CWA, AGSE-UAW (representing graduate student workers), the Coalition of University Employees (representing clericals), University Council-American Federation of Teachers (lecturers, librarians and faculty), the California Nurses Association and Engineers Local 501. Some union members joined service workers to picket, rally and chant; others simply stayed home from work to support the cause.

“At every campus, UPTE members refused to cross the line,” said UPTE President Jelger Kalmijn the day after the strike. “This is the dawn of a new day, where we start to build the kind of point oversight was given to Cal/EPA. Nonetheless, some people consider it to be one of the 10 most contaminated sites in California. At the neighboring site, Stauffer Chemical had produced toxic chemicals since 1997 and pesticides, fungicides, and herbicides for nearly four decades. Starting in 1987, the company changed hands a number of times, and manufacturing continued until 1998. The last owner, Astra-Zeneca Pharmaceuticals, sold 27 acres of property as a Superfund site needing priority cleanup, at some

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Circling the wagons

UC’s Richmond Field Station a toxic soup

U
C has perfected a tactic known as “circling the wagons,” which originally referred to the protective circle western pioneers formed around their wagon trains to fend off attackers. This is often UC’s first approach when anyone challenges its authority or control, whatever the issue.

UC is using this tactic at the Richmond Field Station (RFS) – a UC-owned site about 10 miles north of UC Berkeley – where many employees are frightened about health hazards there and at a neighboring site. Until now, they have been afraid to come forward.

Unknown numbers of UC employees have developed cancers (some of them rare, and indicative of radiation exposure), arsenic poisoning, reproductive problems, and other ailments. The same can be said of people who live in the area or who work downwind. The total number affected is unknown; community groups and union members are pressing state health agencies to conduct a health survey to help assess the effect of exposure to environmental toxins.

To put present concerns in context, when UC bought RFS in 1950 from a weapons manufacturer it was contaminated with arsenic, lead, mercury, PCBs, and pyrite. The pyrite came from Stauffer Chemical Co. next door. Both RFS and the neighboring 85-acre Stauffer site also may be contaminated with processed radioactive materials. Although the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency assessed the neighboring property as a Superfund site needing priority cleanup, at some
Organizing for fairness

Students sit in for living wage

On April 5, students and alumni at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, took over their campus’ admissions office, sitting in to demand a response to their appeal for a living wage for the school’s lowest paid employees.

Just 19 days later, they left after the university agreed to their central demand, promising $1.5 million in resources to improve the wages and benefits of the school’s custodians, groundskeepers and food service workers.

The sit in was organized by the Student Worker Alliance of Washington University on behalf of some 500 contract workers at the private campus, who make an average of $8 per hour with no health or retirement benefits.

About 10% of the service workers have union representation with the Service Employees International Union; the rest are unrepresented. The student group worked with that union and several others in the community in planning the action.

Several of the 13 students who sat in were concerned they could be arrested, face disciplinary action, or other consequences for not showing up for classes, but said their resolve remained to make sure the school’s service workers received better wages and benefits. The students’ action follows a similar one last month at Georgetown University in Washington DC, which helped win a month at Georgetown University in action follows a similar one last month at Georgetown University in Washington DC, which helped win a living wage battle there.

UC union members support service workers strike (continued from front page)

union movement that is going to get us the respect and contracts we deserve, instead of the crumbs some high paid bureaucrat leaves after they are finished,” he added.

Russell Thompson, photo

University negotiated with AFSCME in good faith.

UC Santa Cruz is no stranger to demonstrations, and April 14 brought hundreds of unionists and other members of the campus community out to rally for service workers. “Probably almost a thousand people came out over the course of the day,” according to Dominic Chan, UPTE’s systemwide director in town for the event. “Many classes were held at our picket site to honor the strike.”

A noon rally featured speakers from union, student and community groups, including the mayor of Santa Cruz and two county supervisors. Later in the afternoon, students took over the main road into campus, effectively halting traffic for an hour-and-a-half.

Discontent is systemwide

But strike support wasn’t limited to the usual hotspots. Davis held its own, with picketlines that turned back numerous construction crews. “I observed dozens of construction workers leaving worksites,” reports Davis UPTE activist Scott Hubanks, including one construction supervisor who “wanted proof that it was UC’s fault he had to send his workers home.”

Groups of strikers picketed the Davis campus all day, with a noontime march around campus and the quad, converging on the main administration building for a final rally.

At UC Riverside, AFSCME and other union members set up picketlines at 5 am, turning back truck deliveries and receiving noisy honks of support from passing drivers. “UCR students marched to the cafeteria and essentially shut it down,” reported UPTE Riverside activist Fran Holzer. “Student clubs were also selling food so an alternative to the cafeteria was available,” she added.

Later that evening, students joined union members for a quiet candlelight march to the chancellor’s house to impress upon him the urgency of the service workers’ demands.

At right, UCLA strikers and their supporters rally; below, UPTE and AFSCME techs from UCLA’s Division of Animal Medicine show their solidarity.

Matching at the crack’o’dawn

Strikers at UCLA began picket duty at 4 am to prevent campus deliveries by unionized truckers, then moved on to a major construction site on campus to impact UC’s building business. By 6 am, electrical workers at the site had left, refusing to cross the line. The Theatre at Melnitz Hall was also shut down because UPTE members decided to honor the strike.

Community and labor speakers crowded the podium for a 3 pm rally, including Assemblymember Mervyn Dymally, a member of the Assembly’s Committee on Budget, who announced at the rally that legislators were postponing discussion of the UC budget until the
UPTE members vote to authorize strike

UPTE members from across the state turned out the week of April 25 to vote on whether to authorize the union to call a strike this spring. Members are also signing strike pledge cards to indicate their willingness to participate if a strike is required. “We’ve been in bargaining for a year, and UC has yet to put a wage offer with any money on the table,” said Kevin Rooney, a member of UPTE’s bargaining team. UPTE has demonstrated how turnover savings can pay for step increases, said Rooney, but “UC still won’t even admit that turnover savings exist.”

UPTE’s team continues to insist that UC spend all the money available for our raises on our salaries. UPTE believes UC should use its savings from staff turnover to fund our step program for each year. These steps must be in addition to across-the-board pay increases funded by the state and granting agencies.

Other unionized workers at UC, such as clericals and nurses, are experiencing the same treatment at the bargaining table. “A coalition of UC unions supported the AFSCME strike,” said Cliff Fried, UPTE’s systemwide executive vice president, “and we’re also working together to convince UC to come to a fair settlement for our contracts.”

Informational pickets, presentations to the Regents and special legislative hearings are all taking place to put pressure on UC decision-makers.

Thousands of flyers were distributed outside the Regents’ meeting in Los Angeles last month, while inside the meeting fifteen union members addressed the Regents on the importance of adequately supporting those who do the work at UC. “The more members participate and the more support they have from other UC workers, the greater the likelihood of success,” added UPTE bargaining team chair Doug Owen.

What we can win

Solidarity has been the key to success in past strikes. UPTE won its first contract and biggest raises with strikes lasting a couple of days at selected campuses. Academic student employees and nurses at UC have gained major wage improvements by staging brief walkouts.

A recent strike at Yale University won an eight-year contract with a minimum of 3% raises and step increases each year. In other industries, CWA (our national union) has gone on strike to limit the cost of health benefits. Throughout history, conditions we take for granted were won through strikes, such as the eight-hour work day and union recognition.

The union can select strategic days on particular campuses where locals are best prepared for one-day work stoppages. “Actions like these send a clear message to UC management, legislators, funding agencies and the public about how serious the situation is,” said Jelger Kalmijn, UPTE’s systemwide president.

“This kind of action does not cause great financial hardship for our members,” he adds, noting that if a strike becomes necessary, UPTE’s strike fund will provide a benefit of $40/day to those who participate.

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Workers and community organize against toxic UC site

of the northern portion to a property developer, Cherokee-Simeon Ventures – the same developer with which UC has contracted to build a research park and housing for visiting researchers at the field station.

In 1998, after Astra-Zeneca set aside $100 million to clean up the site, the company accepted an alternate proposal to clean up the site for $20 million. In 1999 the City of Richmond allowed the demolition of the entire 85-acre chemical processing facility, including all chemical storage facilities, laboratories, and buildings. The work was done between 1999 and 2001, without notifying RFS staff or residents and companies in the surrounding areas, and without any oversight or inspections or perimeter monitoring devices.

In 2002, Zeneca started a self-monitored clean up under the jurisdiction of the San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board – again with no public notice. Neighbors and UC staff report that nearly 1,000 truckloads of contaminated earth were hauled away, blanketing the air for weeks at a time. As part of this “clean up,” some highly toxic concrete facilities were ground into gravel for use throughout the property.

In addition, 350,000 cubic yards of highly toxic and volatile substances were both burned and piled onto the site in a 30-acre, 8-foot-high mountain capped by a paper-like concrete cover to allow water run off. Cherokee-Simeon Ventures plans to build high-density housing on top of this mound, which, unlike the regional water board, has the expertise and experience to oversee complex hazardous sites, and the authority to issue and enforce orders to protect public health.

Simeon site next door, and two Department of Health Services branches – Environmental Health Investigations and Occupational Health – to let them know that UC staff were suffering from toxic exposures and request that the state conduct a health survey.

On April 22, the first of two schedule meetings was held with officials from these agencies. From informal notes I’ve seen, EH&S mentioned its air monitoring and some testing for mercury or lead, but didn’t elaborate about what staff have monitored or found, or what they have done to protect workers and neighbors. It did admit that PCBs in the marshland (along the Bay Trail) appear to be expanding.

After that meeting, RFS managers announced a “construction status” meeting with staff (to be held on May 4, as this Update goes to press). A state toxicologist is supposed to attend the meeting.

Contacts your legislators

Oversight of the Zeneca site is the subject of a City of Richmond resolution, a California Assembly bill by Loni Hancock (AB 1360), and a pending Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors resolution to give complete authority to the Department of Toxic Substances Control (DTSC) – which, unlike the regional water board, has the expertise and experience to oversee complex hazardous sites, and the authority to issue and enforce orders to protect public health.

Please contact your legislators to pressure Cal/EPA and also to support AB 1360. Volatile and persistent organic compounds don’t recognize property borders. Even after attempted remediation, both sites remain contaminated. The owners (including UC) are moving ahead with plans to develop the sites, despite the very real possibility that remediation efforts will not protect the workers building on the sites, the future tenants, or people who work or live in the community. – Joan Lichterman
Legislative hearing to investigate UC labor relations problems

Legislators in Sacramento got an earful last month from UC workers fed up with bad faith bargaining. The California State Senate Education Committee conducted a special hearing to investigate UC’s labor relations.

UPTE and other unions testified about how UC drags out bargaining, stalls on raises and unilaterally implements new policies. UPTE’s presentation focused on how UC’s lack of accountability with wage money is causing long-term harm to the quality of the University.

State Senators Jack Scott (D-Altadena) and Jackie Speier (D-San Francisco) were among those who attended. After hearing testimony, she said that the increases paid to UC employees and how some are eligible for public assistance programs, Speier said, “It reminds me of Wal-Mart.

“Some workers are working in an environment where you can’t even afford to support a family on the wages they are paid.”

Senators accuse DOE of anti-UC bias

Two US senators accused the Energy Department of an anti-UC bias in how the agency is shaping the competition over who will manage Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL).

Senators accuse the Department of Energy of poaching UC’s staff in an attempt to ensure that UC doesn’t win the contract.

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“We don’t have the right to negotiate wages like other employees who are covered by a union contract,” said Lisa Kermish, UPTE’s vice president and a senior administrative analyst at Berkeley.

“UC’s lack of accountability with wage money is causing long-term harm to the quality of the University. Some workers are working in an environment where you can’t even afford to support a family on the wages they are paid.”