Pension protection victory

Reinstatement of employee contributions put on hold; UC commits to paying more towards pension plan

A gratifying victory in the fight to protect UC workers’ pensions has been won, after months of sustained effort by a coalition of union activists.

At their last meeting in San Francisco, the regents officially voted to delay implementing a takeway that would have diverted our 2% mandatory contributions from the employee-funded Defined Contribution Plan (DCP) into the employer-funded UC Retirement System (UCRS) pension plan.

About 100 union members took a half-day off work to attend the meeting to demand a “voice in our pensions.” On the same day, union members at campuses and medical centers across the state held actions to make clear to UC that, after years of undermarket salaries, workers cannot afford pay cuts to fund UC’s pension shortfalls.

UC’s contribution up

In response to union pressure, the university also acknowledged that it would pay 15% of salary for any UCRS contribution determined to be necessary, while proposing employees pay 5% of salary.

While this ratio would be closer to the historical precedent for UC contributions (see <www.upte.org/pensionhistory.pdf>), it still lays a heavy burden on employees. And it comes with a future possible 2% loss of employees’ “redirected” DCP funds, a proposal which is still on the table.

“No matter how you slice it, this would add up to a pay cut for ordinary UC workers,” said Jelger Kalmijn, UPTE-CWA’s president.

UPTE wants pension contributions dealt with as part of comprehensive bargaining including raises and health benefits. That will enable members to assess their overall take home pay and benefits plan instead of having pieces taken away one at a time.

Last month also brought legislation to the pension front. Two bills intended to make UC more accountable are winding their way through the legislature. In addition, Assemblymember Leland Yee (D-San Francisco) is proposing a constitutional amendment that would give employees an equal role on the pension governing board (see page 3).

Meanwhile, UPTE’s tech (TX) and researcher (RX) members wrote to legislators and vice chancellors to engage them in a dialogue about the difficulty of retaining quality research staff, pressure which forced UC to more fairly distribute the 1%-extra salary money that had been the topic of negotiations at the pension bargaining table (see page 2).

Pensions will top the agenda in upcoming contract bargaining. UPTE’s TX and RX contracts expire in June 2008. Health care professional (HX) members will also have the right to fully bargain any pension changes.

Livermore building trades workers petition for UPTE-CWA representation

On June 26, a group of building trades workers – electricians, plumbers, painters, laborers, air conditioning mechanics, and others – walked into the state’s Public Employment Relations Board (PERB) in Oakland with a stack of signed cards from their coworkers asking to be officially represented by UPTE-CWA.

The Livermore workers want to take advantage of new “card check” legislation that allows UC to voluntarily recognize the union if a majority of employees in a unit formally ask for representation.

Union activists with the Society of Professionals, Scientists, and Engineers (SPSE), UPTE’s local at Livermore, have been talking to coworkers about developing a collective voice for the lab’s workers, and asking them to sign “authorization” cards asking that the union be recognized as their collective bargaining agent.

Over 8,000 people work at the laboratory and many are working to build support for a union, from scientists and engineers, to clericals and techs. The building trades workers are the first to reach critical mass, with a majority of their unit supporting UPTE representation.

“We’ve overcome the first hurdle in our organizing journey,” said Brion Leri, an air conditioning mechanic who has been involved in the campaign since last year.

Leri says Livermore employees are worried about UC’s contracting out of services when the lab comes under new management in October. Livermore workers face possible loss of retirement benefits, such as has happened at Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico, where UPTE has used legislative and legal pressure to defend employees’ rights.

“Privatization doesn’t look good for current or future employees, and life-changing decisions are about to be made,” said Leri.

“Now, with a majority of us organizing with UPTE, we’re a step closer to having a say in those decisions.”

The next step? PERB will verify the cards and mediate a discussion between UC and UPTE on union representation. If UC recognizes the union, workers could be at the bargaining table very soon.

UPTE’s organizing team submitting cards at the state labor board (from left to right): Ariel Gold, UPTE organizer; Larry Cassidy, Boiler & Pressure Systems Mechanic; Dan Butts, A/C Mechanic; Brion Leri, A/C Mechanic; Ari Krantz, UPTE attorney; Jim Wolford, SPSE president; Rocky Tomice, A/C Mechanic.
Salary increases for medical interpreters

Some 40 interpreters and translators at UC Davis continue to organize for fair pay and classification. The workers provide interpretation and translation services at the UC Davis medical center, but have been paid at least 18% under comparable market wage rates for years.

With the union’s help, the interpreters took a series of collective actions over the past year, including petitions, meetings and a march on Human Resources. Their research showed that below-market salaries had caused a nearly 30% turnover rate and consequently, a drop in the quality of service to patients.

As a result, the interpreters won salary increases of 10% plus retroactive pay back to July 2006 – a start, but still not enough to bring them up to proper pay levels.

New classification, higher pay

After more pressure from the union, UC has agreed to institute a new classification and higher wage scale for all medical interpreters. “Because medical interpretation is recognized as a distinct body of work in the health services industry,” Human Resources representatives said in a written proposal, “the University of California proposes to create a medical interpreter classification series, and extend it to all five medical centers.”

“This is wonderful news,” said Mathew Call, a Spanish interpreter and UPTE Davis medical center’s vice president, “since it means UC finally understands that health care interpreting is its own profession. This is what we’ve truly been advocating for these past two years. What’s even better is that all five UC medical centers will benefit.”

Along with the new job title will be a substantial wage increase. Hourly wages will increase from the current range of $11.10 to $25.01 to a new range of $15.36 to $29.50, depending on campus and classification level.

Historically, medical interpreters have been governed by a patchwork of systemwide university policies and contracts. Currently, UC Davis’ 42 interpreters/translator are in UPTE’s technical bargaining unit, while 33 interpreters at San Francisco, Irvine and Los Angeles are classified as clericals, and 3 San Diego interpreters are patient care techs. UPTE, other UC unions, and the university are discussing which bargaining unit is most appropriate for these workers, a process called “unit modification.”

Call says the Davis interpreters feel UPTE’s health care professionals (HX) unit is the most appropriate for the kind of work they do. “Since our field will soon require certification or licensure and since we are involved in direct patient care,” says Call, “we feel strongly that we belong in a bargaining unit with other health care professionals.”

One of his department’s written translators, Call adds, recently received American Translators Association certification, “the most prestigious in the nation. It’s time we are viewed as professionals.” Call adds that UPTE hopes to finalize the unit modification for the interpreters soon.

Raises for techs and researchers who make under 40K

UPTE bargainers reached agreement in late June over wage increases and range adjustments for some 5,000 research (RX) and technical (TX) unit workers.

Employees in job titles with an average salary of less than $34,500 will receive a 1.95% increase; those with average salaries between $34,501 and $35,500 will receive a 0.95% increase; those averaging between $35,501 and $38,500 will receive a 0.5% increase. “Our mobilization efforts really paid off,” said Kevin Rooney, a San Francisco EHS tech and a member of the union’s bargaining team. UC’s original proposal had excluded large numbers of techs and researchers.

RX and TX employees helped win the increases by participating in UPTE’s campaign of emailing legislators who served on science committees. “We wanted to make sure all the money that the legislature appropriated for these increases was actually delivered to employees, and that UC would not short-change us,” said Ruby Miller, a staff research associate at Riverside and a member of the UPTE bargaining team.

Upping the ante

After four bargaining sessions with UC, the union negotiated nearly 0.5% more in salary increases than was originally proposed, covering approximately one thousand more workers in eleven different job titles (including Animal Techs, Laboratory Assistants and Scene Techs).

The pay increases are calculated using the systemwide average salary for all RX and TX job titles. Salary ranges will be readjusted, ensuring permanent gains in pay.

“We’ve fought hard for a fair step pay system,” said team member Bob Stevenson, a UCSB electronics technician. “Using average pay as the basis for calculating these increases will help maintain that structure, and will give more money to more people around the state.”

The increases are retroactive to April 1, and should be showing up in paychecks shortly. Contact your local for details regarding additional increases for the Berkeley, Santa Barbara and Santa Cruz campuses.

Vanessa Bakula (Staff Research Associate, Davis), Nino Mada (Staff Research Associate, San Francisco) and Emily Montan (Administrative Analyst, Office of the President) at a recent stewards’ training hosted by UPTE Berkeley.

John Lippsett, a UCLA clinical social worker (right) with Aaron Rosenfield, Los Angeles UPTE organizer (left).
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What’s the most important issue facing UC employees, and what’s our best strategy for addressing it?

The most important issue facing UC employees right now has to do with our pensions, our salaries, and our benefits. The best strategy for addressing these issues is solidarity. There is strength in numbers. For many years, we have looked at UC in almost a parental role. They will take care of us as employees in the same way that a loving parent takes care of their children.

In this millennium, we are finding out that UC is a business looking out for the bottom line. Our bargainers need to strongly negotiate at the tables. Our membership has to be willing to stick together behind the bargainers to ensure their strength at the tables.

What would you like to see in future bargaining for the HX unit?

The HX bargainers were fantastic in their marathon bargaining session that ended in March. In the future, I would like to see more specifics built into the contract. Also, systemwide, our benefits are tied to the researcher/tech (RX/TX) negotiations. While I have every confidence in the RX/TX negotiators, it would be nice to have it in the HX contract rather than rely on others. This is a two-way street though. The bargainers can only go as far as the membership will support them. The membership has let the bargainers know actively, not passively, what the level of support for the team will be.

Legislating UC accountability

Legislation that would strengthen workers’ rights at UC continues to make its way through the corridors of power in Sacramento. Senate Bill 190, which would require both the University of California and the California State University systems to comply with existing state law on open meetings, is proceeding through both the Senate and Assembly with virtually no opposition. “We anticipate it will be on the governor’s desk fairly soon,” reports UPTE’s legislative coordinator, Rodney Orr.

The bill, which is backed by UC’s Union Coalition, would require the regents to take action on all executive compensation packages in a public meeting at both the subcommittee and full board levels, and to fully disclose executive compensation packages, closing an existing loophole that lets UC hold “advisory committees” or “task forces” behind closed doors.

“There is no place for secrecy in a public institution like UC,” added Orr. “After hearing case after case of out-of-control executive compensation, legislators recognize these practices need to change.”

Joint governance of pensions

Senator Leland Yee (D-San Francisco) is sponsoring a joint Assembly-Senate resolution recommending joint employee-employer governance of the UC Retirement System. UC’s current board is advisory only, and only under pressure did UC open up two seats for staff representation this June. Many other public institutions of higher education have elected pension governance boards that hold real power to make change. UC unions are also working with Assemblymember Lloyd Levine (D-Van Nuys) to write a constitutional amendment that would require joint governance of the UC pension plan.

Another UC-related bill, AB 1333, sponsored by Lonnie Hancock (D-Berkeley/ Oakland), would require independent actuarial studies available for public review at least 120 days prior to any changes in UC’s employer or employee pension contributions. It is scheduled to be heard at the Senate Education Committee early next year.

All of UPTE’s legislative work is funded by voluntary member donations. No dues are spent on this work. Want to help? Consider donating $5 a month to UPTE’s Committee on Political Education fund. Contact your local to sign up for payroll deduction.

Voices of UPTE: UCLA social worker speaks out

John Lippsett, a licensed clinical social worker at the UCLA medical center and an UPTE activist in the health care professionals (HX) unit. We asked him why he got involved with UPTE, and what issues he feels are crucial to the union’s future.

I have been a social worker at UCLA medical center since 1989. I have been a dues-paying member of UPTE since HX employees voted for a union ten years ago. It is only in the past year that I have become an active member of the union. For many years, I sat back and expected the union to work for me. A series of events last year wherein I had very strong opinions led to my metamorphosis from inactive dues-payer to “primary zone leader” for approximately 100 UCLA social workers.

I am very happy that I have become an active member of our union. I have found that it is much nicer to work with people I like than to complain about people I do not even know. While I realize that my personal side of me allows me to participate in union activities on the scale that I do participate, it is important that all members actively participate to the extent they can. I hope that every union member can be inspired to be active and can enjoy the benefits of solidarity as much as I have this past year.

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for unionizing activities. After the unfair dismissal proceedings, some 31,000 workers
targets of employer intimidation. In 2005 workers who try to form unions are often
needed to permit a full debate and floor vote. The bill would have allowed employees
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In the news

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truckloads of toxic soil illegally buried on the site of a planned housing complex.
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“We had what we feared has been verified,” said Assemblymember Loni Hancock (D-Berkeley) to the Berkeley Daily Planet. “It confirms my fears and the fears of the neighbors, which have been shown to be terribly correct.”
Local labor and community activists had long suspected that 2002-2004 cleanup of the site was mishandled. They organized for an investigation, keeping the issue in the public eye. Contaminants at the site include PCBs and perchloroethylene, as well as hazardous metals such as mercury, cadmium, arsenic, zinc, copper and selenium.
According to the state’s DTSC, UC illegally used as many as 9 trucking companies that didn’t have required hazardous waste registration to move the soil. AstraZeneca is charged with burying over 3,000 truckloads of contaminated waste from UC’s RFS beneath a capped site where the development was planned.
UC’s RFS and the privately owned Campus Bay were sites of chemical manufacturing for decades. UC partnered with a private developer to transform RFS into a corporate and academic research park called Bayside Research Campus, with as much as 1.5 million square feet of new space. A condo complex, designed with as much as 1.5 million square feet of new space. A condo complex, designed with

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