A dramatic scene unfolded at UCLA on June 21, as a large crowd of chanting UPTE-CWA members marched into a bargaining session with UC management to make their voices heard and observe the negotiating process.

UPTE’s elected bargaining team visits UCLA.

They were supporting their elected bargaining team, which was at the table negotiating with the university for UPTE-represented techs (TX), researchers (RX), and health care professionals (HX).

“UC’s bargainers could hear us coming loud and clear and looked surprised,” said one participant.

Marchers brought thousands of petitions signed by union members across the state demanding protection for quality jobs, research, health care and education.

“To be innovative, collaborative, and to build a better world for future generations, we must be able to recruit and retain quality staff for our future,” read the petitions, which were handed directly to UC’s management representatives.

Meanwhile, UPTE members across California blasted photos and words of support for their bargaining team on social media using the hashtag #UPTESTrong.

UPTE’s elected bargaining team is meeting with UC reps every month – in sessions that rotate among campuses – to bargain new contract articles on wages, health care and retirement benefits, and a variety of other issues.

At a UC Santa Cruz bargaining session this month, UPTE members presented strong, compelling arguments about the difficulty of living on below-market wages in an expensive area like Santa Cruz.

Wages, pensions and health care top agenda

UPTE’s bargaining team, which is elected by members across the state, is pushing for strong wage and equity increases.

“We’re fighting management’s attempt to shift greater health care costs to employees,” said Jamie McDole, chief bargain and an HX employee at UC Davis. “UC’s workers can’t afford what is essentially a pay cut in the form of increased expenses, particularly when our wage increases haven’t kept pace with inflation,” she said. The union’s team is also taking a strong stand against a new UC proposal that would damage the fiscal integrity of the University of California Retirement Plan (UCRP), a “defined benefit” pension plan that is a large part of UC employees’ overall compensation.

Management wants a two-tier plan that allows new employees to bypass UCRP for a far riskier 401(k)-style plan.

“This is unfair and unacceptable. Not only would this proposal severely undermine the longevity and stability of UCRP for current and future participants, it amounts to lower compensation over the life of our UC careers,” said Greg Wine, a senior dietitian at UC Davis, and a member of UPTE’s bargaining team.

Why is a pension better?

UCRP is a “defined benefit” plan, which means each participant is guaranteed a set pension amount monthly for the rest of their lives by a standard formula based on the retiree’s age, years of service and highest average 36 months of consecutive pay.

The plan resembles group insurance in that the larger the number of participants, the safer the retirement income.

UC is pushing 401(k)-style accounts that are “defined contribution” plans. Such plans don’t guarantee any retirement income. Employees bear all risks if the stocks or bonds in which the funds are invested tank, which could leave them without retirement funds.

These 401(k)-style retirement accounts generally provide only about half of what a traditional defined benefit pension plan like UCRP provides. They are designed to appeal to UC’s short-term, high-paid executives and are estimated to be a $500 million handout to them.

“So far, UC’s reps have not produced much at the bargaining table,” said UPTE’s president Jelger Kalmijn, a UC San Diego researcher.

“In addition to a proposal to undercut our pensions, they have put out proposals to weaken sexual harassment policy and remove union stewards from the process,” he added, “as well as a plan to increase parking rates and health care premiums,” none of which are in the best interests of employees.

UPTE LOCALS

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UCSF Clinical Lab Scientists join the #UPTESTrong solidarity action.
Organizing for fairness

Business Technology Support Analysts at UC Berkeley demonstrate for fair wages and equity raises at the bargaining table.

A win for Counseling Psychologists

A new group of UC employees who joined UPTE recently – Counseling Psychologists – are making progress at the bargaining table. UC management has agreed to the union’s proposal for health and welfare benefits that match other UPTE-represented units.

That means single-tier pension and health care plans will remain available to this group of workers. UPTE is also aiming to protect “contract” staff who work in the job title, advocating that they be converted into career staff, and that they have recourse for unjust terminations.

Other issues, such as pay and workload, are still being negotiated.

BTSAs push for pay equity

UC’s Business Technology Support Analysts (BTSAs) gained UPTE-CWA representation in late 2016, and are currently in negotiations with management over wages and other issues.

BTSAs members decided a main goal was to bring their title’s wages up to the levels of a similar title, Technology Support Analysts, which has pay rates about 20 percent higher and was already represented by UPTE. They also wanted to create more internal pay equity within the BTSA classification.

But since UC continues to reject the BTSA demands for market wage scales, internal pay equity, and separate sick and vacation leave at medical centers, BTSAs have focused on outreach and action to pressure UC to move.

Spreading the word

BTSAs leafleted an “Equity and Inclusion” event that was part of Berkeley’s “Staff Appreciation Week” in mid-June, while BTSAs in San Diego leafleted at their CampusLISA (Large Installation Systems Administration) conference in late June.

“Are’t experienced staff worth equal pay?” asked Berkeley BTSA3 Peter Lo, who has been with UC for 17 years and is paid 13 percent less than a coworker hired after him.

BTSAs push continues to grow as outreach continues, as in the case for Systems Administrators (SAs) who became represented by UPTE in late May. While UC continues to fight a losing battle over the title at the Public Employment Relations Board, SAs are preparing to follow in the BTSAs employees’ footsteps. – Dan Russell, BTSA and UPTE Berkeley president.

New employees get to hear from unions too

Most new employees at UC go through a management-run orientation by Labor Relations, covering the basics of benefits and work rules at the university.

But one thing UC orientations don’t do is introduce new hires to the organizations that give them a voice and advocate for their interests: unions.

Historically, campus unions have been excluded from UC new employee orientations. New employees only got a full picture of who represented them, or how, or how they could get involved after the union found them at work, or they contacted the union.

A new state law that took effect on July 1 that changes that. AB 119 requires public sector employers to give unions access to new employee orientations – whether in person, online, or by some other means – so that new employees can hear directly from unions about what they do, why they are important, and why every employee should join.

Welcome to the union

AB 119 recognizes that the ability of unions to communicate with the members they serve is necessary to their ability to represent them. It also requires UC to give the union contact information for new employees so that unions can actually reach them.

Whether a new employee decides to join the union is up to them, but every new employee is entitled to full information to make that decision. In union-represented units, becoming a full member doesn’t cost anything additional.

Fair access to new employee orientations is long overdue at the university, and UPTE will be taking full advantage of this new law once implementation details have been worked out with UC.

Have a coworker who isn’t an UPTE member? Ask them to join here: upte.org/join.
University floats troubling stealth retiree health care benefits cut

The UC regents are floating a dangerous proposal to rescind the university's commitment to support retiree health insurance, which would severely affect all current and future retirees.

In 2010, the regents slashed the previous level of retiree health care support, lowering the floor of what it paid for such benefits to just 70 percent of their cost. Retirees now pick up the balance.

UC's new proposal, revealed on a July 12 regents' meeting committee agenda, would have removed 70 percent floor and phased in even more cost-shifting to retirees at a rate of 3% per year.

After unions and faculty groups objected to it, the item was removed from the agenda at the last minute, but word is the proposal will be reintroduced in the fall.

Employees just say ‘no’

Just before the new proposal was removed, UC’s Union Coalition (or which UPTE-CWA is a part) also wrote to UC president Janet Napolitano to object, calling the plan “dangerous” and saying it was “troubling” that UCOP planned to approve the change without input from employees.

The proposal, the coalition said, “shifts the entire risk and burden of future health care inflation during unprecedented times from the employer to the retiree.” In other words, it abandoned UC’s social contract with its employees and retirees.

The systemwide Academic Senate also wrote, noting that while UC’s retiree health benefits “may exceed those offered at some comparison institutions, it is worth noting that many employees – including those nearing retirement and a large number of retirees – accepted lower salaries to remain at UC,” adding that workers now pay a higher floor of what it paid for such level of retiree health care support, lowering the retirement system (UCRS) advisory board.

“Now it looks like they want to force us to pay even more,” he said.

Cutting retiree benefits isn’t new to UC management. In 2013, retirees took a big financial hit as UC instituted a formula to slash its support of retiree health benefits premiums for those with under 20 years of service.

In 2014, UC’s union members mobilized to defeat an even worse UC proposal that would have instituted a “Rule of 50” for current employees – requiring retirees to have a combined 50 years of age and service credit to receive retiree health benefits.

That followed an historic victory for UPTE’s 15,000 researchers, techs and health care professionals, who went on strike to keep a single-tier pension plan and won it at the bargaining table, though UC implemented it for non-represented workers.

How to fight back

Retiree health benefits are a significant part of UC employees’ compensation, and like salary and other benefits, we’ll have to mobilize to preserve them. The best way to defend retiree health benefits is by employees speaking and acting collectively.

Here’s what you can do:

- Stay tuned for updates on how to be active on this issue, and share this article with your coworkers or retired UC friends.
- When you retire, join the UPTE Retiree Association, which works on legislative issues related to pension and benefits, and represents retired members’ concerns in bargaining with UC. Retirees elect one member to UPTE’s systemwide executive board.
- Join the association as a “full member” at $15 a month, which is the strongest level of support for UPTE retirees. You receive information about UC retiree issues and have access to union member-only benefits (like discounts on cell phone service). Full membership allows you to run for union office, vote in elections, and fully participate in UPTE. Alternatively, you can become an “associate member” for $15 a year and receive information about retiree issues.

Learn more at www.upte.org/members/retirees.html.

Sharing our knowledge on best practices for infectious disease training

Workers are the best resources for making our facilities safe and protecting the community from harm,” according to CWA’s recent health and safety training event. To put that belief into practice, 27 union members gathered at the UC Davis Medical Center in Sacramento for a day-long infectious disease training on June 24, developed by the Tony Mazzocchi Center for Health, Safety and Environmental Education under a grant from the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (part of the National Institutes of Health).

The Tony Mazzocchi Center is a project of the United Steelworkers (USW), the Communications Workers of America (CWA) and The Labor Institute. The members were from CWA local 9119 (UPTE) and telecommunications locals 9417 and 9421.

Worker-trainers conduct the trainings, and workers are the center of the learning process. Worker-centered training calls on the experience and knowledge of the workers in the class. Because it is based on sharing knowledge and problem solving, it is much more engaging and more likely to be remembered than employer-provided online training.

“I have a better idea of what UC needs to do and what my responsibilities are to protect me,” said one participant.

Solving problems together

This course, like others developed by the Tony Mazzocchi Center, was based on a workbook used as a resource and guide, with trainers leading small group activities. Each activity had a task or set of tasks for the groups to work on together to solve problems and make decisions about issues based on their experiences and set of factsheets and handouts.

Trainers for the day were Jamie McDole, UPTE systemwide vice president, chief bargainer and health care professional coordinator, and Dave LeGrande, CWA director of occupational safety and health. We hope to have a similar training in August or September for Southern California locals.

For each task each small group selected a scribe to take notes of their discussion and book used as a resource and guide, with trainers leading small group activities. Each activity had a task or set of tasks for the groups to work on together to solve problems and make decisions about issues based on their experiences and set of factsheets and handouts.

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For each task each small group selected a scribe to take notes of their discussion and report back to everyone, telling others how that group handled a particular problem. After all groups reported back, participants usually had a general discussion about the problems. The trainers then summarized key points and brought up things that may have been overlooked.

Members found the class “very constructive and fruitful” for “raising awareness — about ‘potential hazards I hadn’t considered previously.’” One felt “it could help people prevent illness and be more aware of potential exposure,” and said “it will help me question supervisors about my safety and exposure risk.”

— Joan Lichterman

Around the state

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— Joan Lichterman
In the news

UC’s missing $175 million affects state funding

It certainly hasn’t been a carefree spring and summer for UC lobbyists in Sacramento. In late April, the state auditor released a scathing audit of the university that charged that UC’s Office of the President (UCOP) had accumulated $175 million in budget reserves it had failed to disclose.

The audit also found inadequate controls on systemwide programs; excessive administrative spending; UCOP salaries that are higher than comparable state salaries; and that UC had improperly interceded in the auditor’s survey in order to skew the results.

While UC president Janet Napolitano said that most of the budget reserves were in fact dedicated to legitimate programs and that the actual reserves balance was $38 million, the audit came at a difficult time a few months after the UC regents had approved another increase in student fees. More news in June revealed that UC had thrown lavish dinners and parties for the regents during days the board met.

Outrage from legislators

These reports set loose another cascade of calls by the Legislature for increased control over UC’s budget. Lieutenant governor Gavin Newsom demanded that UC rescind its tuition increase. Governor Jerry Brown’s budget withheld $50 million in university funding until UC enacted the reforms specified in the audit.

One state senator introduced a constitutional amendment that would prevent student fee increases in any year in which more than 600 UC administrators were fired or received large pay raises. Another introduced a constitutional amendment that would ask voters whether UC should retain its money.

Lawmakers also approved a budget that included a requirement to fund UCOP directly from the Legislature.

In the past, the state has given money to the campuses which then forwarded a portion to UCOP for administrative support. Funding UCOP indirectly this way gave it unilateral control over how it spent its money.

The state now will send more than $300 million directly to UCOP and require the university to eliminate the campus payments to UCOP. The state currently provides $3 billion to the campuses, about 10 percent of UC’s overall budget.

Under the state constitution, the university is autonomous from state control to shield it from state politics. However, that can also mean there is a lack of accountability.

As of press time, the university is considering whether to challenge the constitutionality of the new budget provisions.

Congress, activists take on Wall Street

As Congressional Republican’s efforts to repeal the Affordable Care Act seem to be going down, the next fight on the horizon is tax reform and economic policy.

Wall Street’s backers and big corporations are already working to repeal the Dodd-Frank Act, which was passed in 2010 in the wake of the financial meltdown to protect consumers and make the system more stable.

The Communications Workers of America (CWA), whose purpose is to fight Wall Street’s power in the nation’s economy and politics and to make the economy fairer for working people.

Now leading members of Congress, such as senators Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) and Bernie Sanders (D-VT), are redoubling the calls for key demands of the Take On Wall Street agenda. These include closing Wall Street tax loopholes on carried interest and CEO bonuses, passing a tax on financial transactions to help pay for college affordability, and other investments to help workers and the poor.

Learn more at takeonwallstreet.org.

CWA & NAACP join in call for open internet

Could an open and free internet be a thing of the past?

It could be, if the Trump administration and the big telecommunications companies get their way.

The Communications Workers of America (CWA), UPTE’s national union, has issued a joint statement with the NAACP calling on the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to enforce open internet rules.

Both organizations urged the FCC to adopt strong, legally enforceable rules that would safeguard an open internet, close the digital divide between rich and poor, and give high priority to job creation.

In comments submitted to the FCC in mid-July, CWA and the NAACP said that the FCC’s repeated reconsideration of internet rules in recent years “distracts public and policymaker attention from the core challenges we face in broadband policy: how to stimulate the hundreds of billions of dollars of investment needed to upgrade our nation’s wired and wireless networks to world class standards; how to maintain and create good, career jobs in the industry; and how to close the digital divide so that every American, regardless of race, income, or geography, has access to affordable, high-speed internet.”

The statement called on the commission to adopt “bright line” rules for internet regulation that would guarantee no blocking, no “throttling,” no unreasonable discrimination, and enhanced transparency.

In May, the FCC put forward a “Restore Internet Freedom” proposal that would scuttle net neutrality rules. The FCC is now led by an anti-regulation ideologue appointed by Donald Trump.

Net neutrality is meant to keep the internet open, and to benefit the public and the economy broadly. In the absence of open internet regulations, big telecom companies like Verizon, AT&T, and Time Warner would be able to manipulate access to benefit themselves, strangle smaller competitors, and undermine the free flow of information.