

Settlement Is Similar to Pre-Strike Offer

University Strikers Call Off Minnesota Walkout

by Mischa Gaus

For the second time in four years, clerical, technical, and health-care workers at University of Minnesota campuses struck to fend off attempts to cheapen their jobs. A new spirit of coordination between four American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) locals—3800, 3801, 3937, and 3260—broadened the 17-day action, which ended in late September.

Long, all-out strikes often face an uphill battle in the United States, and the university strike proved to be no exception.

Facing mounting external pressure and flagging worker support, about 3,200 AFSCME members at the Twin Cities, Duluth, Crookston, Morris, and Rochester campuses returned to work on September 27.

Members approved a new contract in mid-October by 80 percent. The new contract, which is similar to the university's last pre-strike offer, provides technical and clerical workers 2.25 percent cost-of-living increases, with health care workers receiving 2.5 percent raises and all workers receiving a \$300 lump sum in both years of the deal.

BLAMED FOR HIGH TUITION

Over the course of the strike, university administrators did their best to divide strikers from students, other campus workers, and the public, filling campus email in-boxes and ad space in the student newspaper with one-sided reports.

The media campaign tilted public opinion toward blaming AFSCME members, who make an average of \$34,000 a year, for the doubling of the university's tuition during the last seven years. For state residents, tuition is now about \$9,500 a year—63 percent higher than the national average for public universities, according to the College Board, a non-profit organization that tracks higher education pricing.

Strikers cried foul on the administration's attempt to blame tuition increases on them, noting the university is building a \$288 million football stadium.

More than 1,600 management employees and faculty make more than \$100,000 a year, including President Robert Bruininks, whose two-year contract raises his pay by 17.5 percent, to more than \$450,000.

According to the union, top university administrators' pay rose by nearly 40 percent since 1994 while entry-level

AFSCME workers lost 4.34 percent of their paycheck to inflation.

But the administration refused to pass along more than 2.25 percent of the 3.25 percent raise AFSCME lobbied the state legislature to provide workers this spring. To pay workers the additional 1 percent would have cost the university \$1.1 million, said Phyllis Walker, president of Local 3800 in the Twin Cities.

"The university would love to outsource our jobs," said Greg Knoblauch, a senior Veterinary Medical Center technician in the St. Paul campus. Knoblauch, a Local 3937 steward, prepared the inflation-adjusted paycheck analysis. "But because they can't, they're doing the next best thing by eroding our standard of living, deliberately and intentionally."

UNEVEN STRIKE IMPACT

Although AFSCME members make up less than 20 percent of the roughly 17,000 workers in the university system, they found ways to make their numbers felt. Striking technicians at the Academic Health Center in Minneapolis worked with sympathetic Teamsters to document the movement of university goods on the non-university side of a shared loading dock. (Teamsters represent a wide variety of other service workers on Minnesota campuses, including mechanics, custodial staff, and food-service workers).

"With strike actions that were smart and strategic, we were able to make way more of an impact than the university was willing to admit," said Laura Dillon, a lab technician at the health center and member of Local 3937.

The strike galvanized a coalition of faculty, staff, and students that opposes the university's corporate drift, said Sofi Shank, a first-year student who participated in a student hunger strike and disruption of a Board of Regents meeting in support of workers. The regents formulate contract offers. She said the university administrators' strategy of attacking AFSCME devalues women workers, who make up 93 percent of organized clerical workers and the

majority of AFSCME members at the university.

"This administration is above shaming," Shank said.

Despite the attempts to broaden the strike, the number of strikers who hon-

ored pickets hit 50 percent at most according to union estimates. Dillon said workers under financial strain shied away from the strike because the union's strike fund was smaller than needed.

"We are the lowest-paid group of employees at the university," said Vicki Everett, an administrative assistant at the Duluth campus and a member in Local 3801. "The university knows well we are the group that can least afford to go on strike."

ONGOING FIGHT

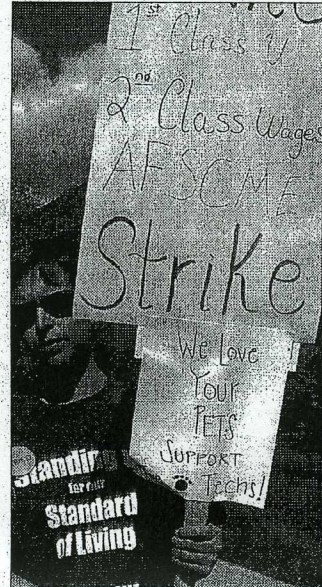
Denise Osterholm, president of Local 3801, says the university AFSCME locals are seeking new ways to challenge the state legislature and the regents.

Besides wresting away the governor's power to appoint regents before the contract expires in two years, the union and its supporters are debating whether to launch a recall campaign for Bruininks, the university president.

The unions are also working with supportive legislators to uncouple appropriations for their raises from the general pot of cash the university receives from the state. A specific line-item appropriation, union leaders say, would ensure the legislature's intent isn't swallowed up by uncooperative administrators.

Disappointed by uneven support, the union's priority is to engage members, said Geraldine Hughes, an office administrator at the Duluth campus and a member of Local 3801's executive committee. Active members are organizing a welcome committee that will greet new workers on their first day, Hughes said, and explain what the human-resource orientation leaves out about the union's role in advocating for workers. □

[Help pay the bills of Minnesota strikers by replenishing their mutual support fund. Donate online at uworkers.org or send checks to: U Workers Support Fund, c/o AFSCME, 1313 5th St. SE, Minneapolis, MN 55414.]



St. Paul Union Advocate