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CONTACTS: Jennifer Lovaasen • 651-287-0575 work • 651-357-8544 cell

FAIR WAGES COULD AVERT SEPT 5 STRIKE AT U of M

Barring a fair wage offer by the University of Minnesota, classes will start next week with 3500 clerical, technical and health care workers poised to strike on September 5 at campuses in the Twin Cities, Duluth, Morris, Crookston and Rochester.

“The University has chosen to impoverish some of its workers,” said Barb Bezat, president of AFSCME Technical Local 3937. “Now is the time to avert a strike and start the school year off right by paying us fair wages that keep up with inflation. It won’t break the U’s \$1.5 billion operating budget.”

Last week AFSCME members overwhelmingly voted to reject the University’s assault on their wages and authorize a strike. The University has offered unacceptable wage increases of only 2.25 percent for clerical and technical workers, and 2.5 percent for health care workers. The proposed raise would mean only \$850 a year for the typical striker who earns \$34,000 a year. This worker would qualify for food stamps to support a family of four. Inflation is projected to be 3.5 percent next year, so the wage offer would effectively be a pay cut.

State employees got a 3.25 percent raise in both years of their contract from the Pawlenty Administration, plus step increases to reward longevity. The Minnesota Legislature has provided funding to both the state and University to help with wages and health care costs.

“While our paychecks shrink, top administrators are enjoying huge raises,” explained Phyllis Walker, president of Clerical Local 3800. In the past 5 years, frontline staff has seen wages adjusted for inflation fall 4.8 percent. Meanwhile, administrative salaries have increased an average of 27 percent, while faculty salaries have increased 19 percent. Today more than 1,500 University employees earn more than \$100,000 each year.

“It would take only \$1.1 million to offer us an additional one percent increase,” said Denise Osterholm, president of University of Minnesota Duluth Local 3801. “If the University can’t do that, then it’s looking to break our union. “

A last minute deal seems unlikely after the union and employer met August 29. To break impasse, AFSCME made major moves on wages, proposing a 3.5 percent increase for each of the next two years plus one percent to offset years of increased health insurance costs. The University responded with no changes.

AFSCME continues to prepare to strike September 5, the day after fall classes begin. Frontline workers will be noticeably absent from orientation, registration and other back to school rituals.

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