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Barry Thele
CSEA Union Steward



"I worked 20 hours at first and so far I'm only at 35 hours. I've been trying everything to try to get those 40 hours and also get a contract of 11 months. It's been kind of impossible. For retirement I'm looking at quite a long time, but I like what I do and I wouldn't go anywhere else."

Evelia Zepeda
SC Food Services employee



"There are classified employees, that if you look at the salary schedule, they make less than \$15 an hour, which is absolutely unacceptable. So we are doing a classification review and I'm hoping that's going to put the lowest level jobs in a place where they come up to at least what I call a livable wage."

Dr. Kindred Murillo
SC President

CAMPUS FINANCES



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OUR DAILY BREAD — Estela Villegas helps feed students, but struggles to feed her own family. SC's classified union leaders call that unjust.

CSEA FIGHTS FOR 'LIVING WAGES'

Julia Wook
News Editor

Josie Kane is retirement age, but dares not retire. Kane has dedicated 37 years to feeding students as part of the Southwestern College Food Services team. She is diabetic and dependent on insulin, which is covered in her health care plan. She would like to hang up her spatula soon, but her current contract does not include health care benefits after she retires. Kane and her co-workers are trapped in the kitchen for life.

"I have diabetes (which requires) insulin, syringes and medicine," she said. "I knew I was covered here and I appreciated that. When I started (on insulin) I was paying a dollar for like three bottles. Now it's like \$10."

CSEA President Silvia Nogales has set out to change these conditions so that classified employees can retire with dignity.

"The contract reads that you have to be a full-time employee to get the retirement benefits," she said. "That's the sad part. They work all these years and when it's time for them to retire they don't have that benefit."

Nogales said the current CSEA contract limits benefits to full-time employees who work 40 hours a week, 12 months a year. Classified employees in food services are considered part time even if they work 40 hours a week because they work only 11 months. That disqualifies them from retiring with benefits.

Nogales said the union looks to revised contracts that will allow part-time and full-time employees to retire with some level of benefits.

"I don't see a reason why the district should fight us on that," she said. "It's only fair."

Nogales said some student workers make more money than classified staff.

"Many hourly and student workers are working more hours than our contracted employees," she said. "It's sad that a student worker can make more money than a contract employee."

Nogales said contracted employees that work .475 percent of a contract equates to about three hours a day. Student and hourly workers, she said, often work five to six hours a day. Student workers are capped at 20 hours a week, but employees who work three hours a day, five days a week end up working 15 hours. Most of these jobs are held by parents or heads of households, Nogales said, which places them in precarious financial position. Some hold two or three additional jobs and suffer food, housing and medical insecurity.

"We have about 330 non-teaching employees that make up the other workforce," she said. "The administrative secretaries, the clerks, the IT, the food services, the custodians, gardeners, mechanics, lab coordinators, lab technicians, student services — everybody that provides a service to our students."

Evelia Zepeda, one of Kane's colleagues in food services, has been an hourly employee for five years and a classified employee for nine years. She said her passion is cooking and being around students. Her contract is 35 hours for nine months, leaving her three months out of the year looking for ways to supplement her income. Retirement, she said, seems impossible.

"Retirement is going to take a long time to go on the steps," she said. "Especially when I worked 20 hours at first and so far I'm only at 35 hours. Five hours shy of 40. I've been trying everything to try to get those 40 hours and also get a contract of 11 months. It's been kind of impossible. For retirement I'm looking at quite a long time, but I like what I do and I wouldn't go anywhere else."

■ CLASSIFIED EMPLOYEES ARE OFTEN LOCKED INTO LOW PAY BY A SYSTEM THAT IS STACKED AGAINST THEM. TO RECEIVE HIGHER PAY, CLASSIFIED WORKERS ARE EXPECTED TO WRITE A SOPHISTICATED RECLASSIFICATION REQUEST.

Nogales said there is a case where an employee worked in catering for 24 years before her position was converted to full-time in September. She worked three hours a day, with a .475 contract and no benefits. Supervisors had told the employee there was not enough money in the budget, but yet they continued to hire student and hourly employees to do the work that piled up in her absence, as well as expensive administrators.

Nogales said if there was money to pay those workers, there was money to pay the employee. She said now this employee earns benefits at the full-time rate, versus the previous .475.

This was not an isolated case, Nogales said, and the college has been abusing some of its most vulnerable workers for decades. Several employees have similar partial contracts, including many in food services workers.

"In food services those are nine, 10- and 11-month positions, so they only work a certain amount of hours during the day, but they employ 42 student workers," she said.

President Dr. Kindred Murillo said she was unaware of the situation in food services, though one of her priorities since her arrival at SWC is addressing the fact that some classified employees do not make a livable wage.

"There are classified employees, that if you look at the salary schedule, they make less than \$15 an hour, which is absolutely unacceptable," she said.

"So we are doing a classification review and I'm hoping that's going to put the lowest level jobs in a place where they come up to at least what I call a livable wage."

Too many classified employees are not treated humanely, Nogales said.

"We are an institution of higher education and we are supposed to be, or should be, providing livable wages," she said. "That includes health and welfare, that includes compensation, and that includes a safe working environment so they can do the job of servicing our students."

Classified employees are often locked into low pay by a system that is stacked against them. To receive higher pay, classified workers are expected to write a sophisticated reclassification request.

Nogales said the reclass process would challenge people with advanced degrees and are an unfair barrier for people who are not trained as lawyers or administrators.

Murillo said a systemic classification review was an important component of the new CSEA contract, as is for an additional step on classified salaries beginning July 2020.

Nogales said immediate classification reviews are essential. She said the current process is laborious and can take years when classified employees cannot wait years. Many positions have not been studied or reclassified for 10 years or more, she said.

"It's gut wrenching work because you are dealing with people's lives," she said. "As a union representative I want to see our employees thriving and happy to come to work and doing the jobs at livable wage so they can go home and provide for their families. That's it."

Classified employees are some of the college's most loyal and faithful, Nogales said. CSEAs senior employee has worked at the college for 41 years, she said, and the last round of 36 retirees took 2,700 years of combined institutional memory with them.

"They enjoy coming to work every day, they enjoy serving students, they enjoy serving the community," she said. "By helping to improve the lives of our students, we improve our lives and we improve our community."

Nogales said there has been significant headway in negotiations with the district, with Vice President of Human Resources Rose De Gaudio negotiating on behalf of the college. Together they are trying to resolve other issues involving the classified employees, like paying an hourly employee for doing the work of a classified employee.

"When Rose came in she recognized right away that we employ hundreds of hourly employees and she understands that employing hourly personnel to do classified work is a no-no," said Nogales. "So she is helping us to try to fix that and get that under control."

Food Services employee Ricardo Godoy said part-time workers are taken advantage of in many ways.

"There are nine-month employees asked to work in an hourly capacity, out of class," he said.

CSEA union steward Barry Thele concurred. "They got nine months, but the college needed them for hours so the employees come back in an hourly capacity," he said. "We need to hire them full-time."

Enrique Ramirez, a 30-year food services employee, said he and his colleague are tired of hearing the district is "working on it."

They said the instability of SC's administration has crippled progress and damaged employees.

"(Previous VPs were) very supportive, but before we get anything done we get turnover," he said. "Next thing you know, that vice president has left and we have to start this process all over again."

Nogales said the food services department falls under Dr. Kelly Hall, the new VP of Business and Financial Affairs who joined the college less than six months ago. She said she is hopeful a fairer contract will get things done this time around. Nogales said that is also her goal.

"We are trying to work with this new vice president and I think we will accomplish some things with this vice president that we have not been able to do in the past," she said.

Murillo said the college is negotiating with all its units and college leadership had made a generous proposal.

"I think we've put a very good offer on the table, so I can say I feel pretty comfortable that we've agreed to do that," she said.

Nogales said she is hopeful CSEA and the college have made strides in converting part-time employees to full-time.

"We take it one position at a time, that's all I ask," she said. "That we honestly look at some of these and let's convert them where we can. Let's revisit in a year, let's see where the funding is at."

Nogales said she believes the college will eventually do right by the classified employees.

"It's what's fair. It's what's just and it's what's right."



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Josie Kane
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