

SANTA BARBARA-- Juan Donato wakes up every morning at 5 a.m. to blow leaves before students arrive for classes at 8. He works on the east side of campus, near the ocean. When people ask, he says he works on the beach.

Donato is a groundskeeper at UC Santa Barbara and one of 14,000 clerical, administrative, and support workers in the midst of negotiating a new contract with the UC. On February 1st a [UC-wide rally](#) took place on UCSB's campus when workers marched to demand a fair wage, maintain their health benefits, and secure their pensions. Donato was one of the demonstrators.

"We work at a very nice institution. As workers we would like to feel like we belong. Yeah we're getting paid good, but we want to keep up with that," says Donato.



The east side of campus where Donato spends most of his day. He says they use the "heavy equipment" before students get to campus. Photo credit: Amarica Rafanelli

The UC's contract is offering no raise over the next 5 years, despite rising inflation rates. The average salary for a full-time employee like Donato is just \$22.70 an hour, or \$47,398 per year, according to a [study](#) out of Occidental College that showed UC employees suffer overwhelming levels of food insecurity. "I just do the math and.. something doesn't feel right.

Everything is going up... In time there will be no equality," says Donato. Michael Kline, an intern at AFSCME, the largest UC labor union, says the UC has sent out system wide emails to

convince employees their wages are comparable to other service workers. “They say that your wages are already competitive so therefore you don’t need anymore, but what’s competitive when everyone is suffering,” says Kline.

Low wages and skyrocketing rents in Isla Vista make it nearly impossible for workers to live in the area, says Kline. Most workers work 2-3 jobs and have to make long commutes to make it to their jobs on campus. An influx of students and a lack of rent control has pushed workers out.

“I was speaking with a Carrillo worker that drives from Oxnard,” Kline said. “Our workers used to live in Isla Vista.”

Food insecurity plagues many UC employees making just above the minimum wage. More than two-thirds of UC workers say they cannot put adequate food on the table, according to the Occidental College study by the Urban and Environmental Policy Institute. The study about food insecurity amongst UC employees found UC workers are more than one and a half times the food insecurity of UC students, and more than five times that of U.S. households. 80 percent say they have to choose between buying food and paying their rent.

Over the past 10 years the UC system has increased its student population while cutting jobs. Between 2009 and 2014—as UC increased student enrollment by 9,000 new students—the number of service workers directly employed by UC decreased by almost 150 positions, according to a [study](#) conducted by the UC labor union. “Instead of hiring more people they are making the staff work more,” says Kline. “A lot of service workers I speak to have bad backs, bad knees because they are out every day doing that work.”

During the Thomas Fire in December of last year finals were postponed because of poor conditions. Students were released early to escape the smoky air and avoid a potential mandatory



evacuation. But UCSB’s service workers had to continue working. Many maintenance workers, like Donato, were working outside when air quality was rated “[unhealthy](#)” by the county. The Chancellor agreed to give workers two days of paid administrative leave, but this was not enough for many workers unable to make the commute because of road closures or those suffering from health problems because of poor air quality. Workers rallied for a complete campus closure, but campus remained open despite pressure from

the Teamsters Union. “Workers [were] suffering extreme health risks,” said Kline. “There is a lack of respect for the dignity of our workers.”

In 2014, the university recognized Juan Donato for his excellent work ethic. Donato has been working at UCSB since 2010.

The UC’s new contract offers a privatized retirement plan, an offer that AFSCME says is unfair. “The UCs are pushing for a cut on pensions for all staff across the board except for themselves” says Kline. As of now, employees have pensions which place the investment risk on the plan provider, in this case the UC. But the UC wants to change workers’ retirement plans from pensions to 401Ks, which would place the investment risk on the individual. Donato says he is hesitant to accept the offer because in the last recession his friends with 401Ks lost their savings. “I’m afraid that some of my coworkers don’t know what [it] means. My intention is to inform. I want to gain understanding on the pros and cons,” says Donato.

The UC says it is offering workers fair wage increases and excellent retirement benefits, despite workers' objections to the current proposal. "Wages for UC's service and patient care employees are currently at or above market," says Stephanie Beecham, the media relations director at UCSB. The UC says the increases they have proposed will ensure workers' wages remain competitive. As for retirement plans, Stephanie says current workers will be able to *keep* their pensions. "Future hires would be given a choice between a traditional pension plan or a 401k-style plan," says Beecham. The UC says this is a choice many employers don't offer. And a pension plan? That is even more rare, according to the UC.

If the UC and its workers can't agree on a contract, workers will strike. The UC has been sending its workers emails to convince them to accept their contract—No increase in wages over 5 years and a cut in pensions. Kline says the UC is threatening to fire workers who strike.

For Donato, the fight is for his coworkers. "We are a team. If I'm ok and some of my coworkers are not ok, then I'm not ok...That's why I joined the cause," said Donato. Donato says the contract is not about getting more, it's about securing a fair future. "Don't get me wrong, working here at UCSB is great. I just want to make sure we don't lose what we already have," he says.

Donato sits at a picnic table on campus after getting off work. His 11-year-old daughter, Vanessa, sits next to him nibbling on a Subway sandwich. She goes to Brandon Elementary School in Goleta. Donato looks at her, a curly haired girl with a bright smile like her dad. "I want to leave a better world for my children. If it's not me, who else is gonna do it?...If not now, when?...That's why I chose to be part of the rally."

