

Michigan: Students rally for striking Oakland University professors

Court delays return-to-work order

Tom Eley
10 September 2009

The Oakland University administration's effort to force striking professors back to work through court order was delayed Wednesday morning, when Oakland County Circuit Court Judge Edward Sosnick ordered a resumption of negotiations before holding a hearing on the lawsuit this morning.

About 600 professors at Oakland University have been on strike since September 3, and classes at the university, which were due to begin on Tuesday, have been suspended at the school, located in suburban Detroit not far from Pontiac.

Negotiations between representatives of the faculty union, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), and university administrators resumed after Sosnick's order. Later in the day, AAUP spokesmen announced that critical issues remained unresolved.

If negotiations are not concluded by this morning, Judge Sosnick could order the professors back to work. In the suit, the university administration claims that the strike is illegal under Michigan's reactionary labor law prohibiting walkouts by public employees.

Professors say there are two critical issues in the strike. One is university "governance," the faculty's ability to oversee the content of the courses they teach, as well as other teaching conditions. The second is health care. Faculty are fighting against the imposition of a two-tier health care system, by which professors deemed "unhealthy" by a third party would pay considerably higher insurance contributions than those listed as "healthy."

The administration is also demanding that faculty accept a three-year wage freeze, even after handing OU President Dr. Gary Russi a \$100,000 pay raise, bringing his salary to \$350,000 per year.

On Wednesday afternoon, about 300 Oakland University students and school employees joined with professors in a rally on the school's campus. Professors and students carried signs and picketed the school's main entrances from nearby motorways.

The strike has received broad support from the student body. Students say that they count on the professors to defend the quality of their education. Many identify, through personal experience, with the professors' struggle for health care and decent working conditions.

Students have been victimized by consecutive annual tuition increases of 7 percent last year and 9 percent this year. Many students are forced to take on jobs in order to meet tuition bills or take out tens of thousands of dollars in student loans—even as their prospects for finding decent paying work after graduation have dimmed on account of the economic crisis.

Most Oakland University students come from Michigan, many from the greater Detroit area. They have seen their communities devastated by the collapse of the auto industry. Many have had parents or friends lose jobs or suffer through wage and benefit cuts.

Professor Jo Reger of the Sociology Department and Women's and Gender Studies noted that the supportive

mood among students stemmed in part from their own experiences.

“Students are suffering,” she said. “I think they get it. Many of them are working full time to pay for school.” Reger recalled that when she went to school, state financial aid paid for her education. “Now the students aren’t getting financial aid. It’s getting harder for our students to be here. That doorway is being shut.”

Caitlin, a senior in communications, said that the administration is taking advantage of faculty members. She said that tuition bills are difficult. “I work two jobs and I’m putting myself through school,” she said.

Mark, a recent graduate, is without work. He said that the changes the administration is trying to make “are not good for students or for their degrees of study.”

“From the administrators’ perspective, you are a nine digit number,” Mark said.

Liliana Barska, a senior in linguistics, said that she believes the central issue is the defense of quality education at Oakland University. “The professors are the ones who teach the courses,” she said. “They should be responsible for determining academic standards.” Barska depends on loans to pay for her education.

Thomas and Tim are both sophomores in medical laboratory science. “We’re here to support the teachers,” Thomas said.

“Professors have been here for the students, and we want to be there for them now,” Tim added.

The two also made reference to recent tuition increases at Oakland. Tim said he’s making his way through school on “massive loans,” and Thomas said he has been unable to hold a job to support his education.

In discussions with students and professors, *World*

Socialist Web Site reporters pointed to the class and political questions bound up with the strike. The attack on the wages and conditions of the professors is part of a broader offensive against the working class as a whole, they said.

They encouraged students to build a chapter of the International Students for Social Equality at Oakland University.

Join the ISSE

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[9 September, 2009]

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