

US government intervenes against faculty at Youngstown State University

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The US Department of Education instructed the administration of Youngstown State University in Ohio to withhold federal financial aid from students while the faculty threatened to strike, according to the university's president.

On August 19, after negotiations between the university administration and faculty broke down, the university sent thousands of students a letter informing them that they would not receive financial aid until their faculty dropped their plans to strike on August 26.

YSU President Cynthia Anderson wrote a letter August 22 to students stating that the university made the move under the direction of the Department of Education, an agency of the Obama administration.

"The administration has been served an official strike notice from the faculty, which means we cannot with certainty ascertain when classes will start. Given such uncertainty, the US Department of Education—which regulates all financial aid—has directed us not to disburse financial aid and scholarship funds," she wrote.

"If we ignored the directive and disbursed the funds anyway, the university could face significant financial and other penalties from the US Department of Education," she added.

The impact of the government's position was to place enormous pressure on the faculty by holding students hostage. Many students depend on these checks not only for tuition, but for regular expenses as well.

The university is demanding cuts to the pay and benefits of the average faculty member of between \$4,000 per year, according to the university's trustees, to as much as \$10,000, according to the faculty union.

On Thursday, faculty rejected the latest offer by the university by a "substantial margin," according to the union. However, only a few hours later the union

announced that there would be no strike and that classes would resume Monday.

"We have agreed to accept unprecedented concessions and have canceled a strike called for Friday in order to protect the interests of students," said YSU-OEA president Julia Gergits.

Students are scheduled to begin receiving their financial aid checks—which are usually sent out about 10 days before the start of classes, on Monday.

Students said they felt they were held hostage by the administration, and that the decision to withhold financial aid played a significant role in the union's decision. "Some faculty told us that is the only reason they called off the strike," said Corey Chadman, a graduate teaching assistant.

"We feel betrayed. We feel that the faculty which are employed here are not being treated fairly and because of this, the students are suffering too," wrote Stacy A. Barthlemess, a student at the university, in an open letter posted on Facebook.

Dozens of students gathered August 22 to protest the cuts to their financial aid, and hundreds have joined a Facebook group to support the faculty.

The university's board of trustees held a press conference Friday to announce the normal resumption of classes, and to stress that all their demands remain in force. Scott R. Schulick, chair of the board's finance and facilities committee, said the cuts to faculty pay and benefits were part of a "paradigm shift in higher education."

"The 2008 financial and economic crisis has spilled out into all walks of life," he declared. He noted that Youngstown State University took a \$7 million cut in its federal funding, resulting in a \$1.7 million deficit in the university's 2012 budget.

Mr. Schulick said that the university's professional

administrative staff has already had its salaries frozen this year, and that the faculty will set a precedent for other employees. “We intend to pursue the same contract terms that have been presented to the faculty with all other employees on campus,” he said.

The contract terms include a broad range of cuts. The faculty will be subject to a two-year wage freeze, and a third year in which salaries will increase 2 percent. At the current rate of inflation, that will mean an 8.6 percent cut in real wages, or \$6,000 after three years.

But the brunt of the cuts will fall on pay for summer classes, which will be cut from an average of \$8,124 to \$6,498 per course, resulting in a pay cut of almost \$5,000 for professors who teach three courses over the summer. Schulick said the average salary of a faculty member is \$72,213 per year.

In addition, the university is demanding that faculty pay significantly more of their health care benefits, which Schulick said would cost faculty an additional \$757 per year.

The demand for thousands of dollars in concessions from the faculty comes on top of other cuts. The university increased its tuition by 3.5 percent last year, and initiated a “separation incentive” program to induce higher-paid faculty to retire.



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