

Southern Illinois University faculty strike

Our reporters

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Faculty at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale walked out on strike for the first time in the college's history on November 3. Hundreds of students, graduate assistants and other university workers have joined the instructors' picket lines in the past week to show their support.

The Faculty Association, an Illinois Education Association-affiliated union representing tenured and tenure-track faculty, declared the strike last Thursday at midnight after more than a year and a half of failed negotiations with the SIU Board of Trustees and administration. FA President Randy Hughes said about 220 of the 250 members cast ballots, with 92 percent in favor of strike authorization. The union represents about 694 tenured and tenure-track faculty members.

Three other campus unions, including GA United graduate workers union, reached agreements with the university just before the FA strike call.

At issue in the dispute is opposition to the increasing corporatization of curriculum and organization at SIU. Uppermost in this assault is the effort by the university to strip professors of tenure rights. Faculty have also been under pressure year after year to take on more clerical and "distance education" tasks that detract from time in the classrooms and quality time paid to students. The SIU administration is also insisting on increasing furlough days.

The union has called for transparency and accountability in reduction-in-force language in the contracts, and for final decisions to be held to third party arbitration. Chancellor Rita Cheng insists in maintaining the "Board of Trustee policy as it currently exists" and the administration refuses to open the university's financial books to its workforce. For its part, the FA has meekly suggested tying furlough days to the financial strength of the university, a request the administration and Board of Trustees have dismissed out of hand.

The university has threatened to punish faculty for participating in the strike. Cheng, in comments leading up to the strike, said the university would seek replacements to fill in for missing faculty in the hope of maintaining normal operations. These substitutes include retired faculty and professionals.

In a press conference Friday, Mortenza Daneshdoost, lead negotiator for FA, said the union estimates about 175 to 200 faculty members are honoring the strike. WSILTV reported that students were joining the picket lines on Friday in solidarity with their professors after finding only an attendance-taker in their classrooms. Senior Halsey Ebree told the television station, "Our teachers are with us from day one. They're like family."

On November 4, a large group of dental students joined the faculty pickets. By November 7, more than 1,000 students gathered in front of Anthony Hall on campus in solidarity with striking faculty, vowing to come back daily until a contract is reached. Many of the students are affiliated with the Occupy SIU and Occupy Carbondale protesters who have been encamped on the SIU campus since last month.

One doctoral student writing on the Occupy SIU blog Wednesday expressed frustration at the university. "SIU administration is acting like the only effect this strike is having on the university is a tiny percent of classes being cancelled or having substitutes. What about the stress, anger, and frustration felt by so many of us who care deeply about what happens at this university? I may not have any cancelled classes, but I can't focus on my work, am incredibly stressed out, and will never feel the same about SIU again. Wake up, SIU! Everything's not going back to normal when the strike ends. The bad feelings will remain for a long time after."

A petition circulated by students expressed the sentiment that the impasse was indicative of "a larger

problem... I believe that greed and corruption are at the center of this struggle. It is not the greed of the Faculty however, it is the greed for money and power at the top.”

The petition addresses itself in the form of an appeal to the administration and calls for the resignation of Cheng and another key administrator.

The administration has repelled this approach. After supporters of the faculty commented on the university page in support of the strike, the SIU administration removed them and closed comments, calling the censored remarks “abusive language.”



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