

Detroit's Wayne State University targets faculty tenure

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The administration at Wayne State University is using the expiration of the faculty's three-year contract to fundamentally undermine job protection for tenured professors at the school. Wayne State, located in Midtown Detroit, is a major research university along with the prestigious University of Michigan in nearby Ann Arbor and Michigan State in East Lansing.

At the eleventh hour the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) extended its contract beyond the July 31 deadline until the end of September. This would put the new expiration well after the key fall registration period and the beginning of classes.

The AAUP represents about 2,000 faculty and professional support staff at Wayne State University. About 1,000 of them are tenured or on a tenure track and would be directly affected by the proposed changes to job security.

The administration's demands have broad implications for students and other staff, and indeed for publicly funded educational institutions nationwide. They are part of the general assault on social programs and education sweeping Michigan and the US.

For the last dozen years, under Democratic and Republican governors alike, the fifteen universities in Michigan have been starved of state funding. Tuition skyrocketed over the same period.

In the 1990s, state dollars rose to about half of all university operating budgets. That has now dropped to average about 22 percent of university budgets. At the same time, tuition has nearly doubled in 10 years. Universities are forced to be highly dependent on corporate donations, endowments, and public and private research grants for funding.

WSU President Allan Gilmour, a former auto executive, is demanding a raft of provisions in the next contract related to termination for "just cause." He took over the university a little over a year ago and says he wants the negotiations with the AAUP to address "flexibility" and "accountability." These buzzwords are being used in other recent public sector struggles across the country to demand the working class pay to cut budgets.

He is the first nonacademic to lead Wayne State. Gilmour spent decades in Ford's top management and became CFO of the auto company in 2003. He turned an interim appointment as

Wayne State's president into a formal position in a climate of cuts.

Higher education institutions across Michigan are being systematically starved of public funds. At Oakland University in fall 2009, the administration tried to establish a new contract provision in which 20 percent of the 600 faculty would work with no tenure or job security. Professors struck for more than a week to oppose the plan. Last year a judge ordered professors at Central Michigan University back to work less than 24 hours after they went on strike on the first day of classes rather than work without a contract.

In the larger Detroit metropolitan area, faculty at Oakland University and Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti have union contract deadlines coming up this year as well.

Detroit has been called ground zero for many initiatives to undermine workers' lives. This includes deindustrialization, budget cuts, and the closure of public schools. Obama oversaw the forced bankruptcy of General Motors and Chrysler, demanding that workers accept deep cuts in jobs, wages and benefits. The UAW facilitated these cuts and they have become the model for wage cutting in every economic sector and in every part of the country.

Detroit Public Schools Emergency Financial Manager Roy Roberts laid off thousands of teachers, cut pay, and is opening charter schools and schools with uncertified teachers. The state legislature has passed a plethora of laws to undermine teachers pay, benefits and working conditions statewide.

To make the cuts he wants at Wayne State, Gilmour is determined to undermine the entire tenure structure. The administration would make Wayne State the example for the destruction of academic tenure throughout the country.

Politicians of both parties claim that there are no funds for education, even as the national treasury has been looted of trillions of dollars to provide a blank check to the investment bankers and CEOs. This has been the policy of both Republicans and Democrats, and of the Obama administration.

Obama and his Secretary of Education Arne Duncan have launched a campaign against public school teachers, blaming them for the failure of the US education system. Whatever tenure rights K-12 teachers have won are constantly under attack in the press, with the demand that "bad" teachers be

weeded out of the schools.

A faculty member at Wayne State, like professors in most universities in the US, earns tenure only after six or more arduous years, in which teaching methods and research output are scrutinized. Tenure provides academic freedom where the study and promotion of views, even those views contrary to those held by other faculty or the institution's administration, are protected.

The history of tenure in the US goes back to the turn of the last century. Before then, financial donors were accustomed to using their clout and donor money to get faculty hired and fired. An important step in codifying tenure was in 1894 when Richard Ely, a prominent Progressive, was a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He came under attack by business interests and by members of the state legislature for his pro-labor views. The University of Wisconsin Board of Trustees responded with a resolution committing itself to academic freedom and retained Ely.

At Wayne State, though all faculty are evaluated on a regular basis for merit pay increases, once tenure is attained, professors are retained except under severely extenuating circumstances. No tenured faculty member can lose their job without just cause and is subject to peer review and Board of Governors approval. Under the new plan the faculty members' only recourse would be a private meeting with the university president.

Besides including the few narrow conditions that are now considered just cause for taking away tenure and terminating employment, there are new onerous provisions in management's proposal to the union. These provisions relate to elimination of departments or departmental programs. They allow dismissal of tenured faculty if their department or another institutional entity where they work is eliminated.

By weakening the need to declare a financial crisis in which the entire university is under financial threat, called "financial exigency," and again cutting the university Board of Governors out of the process, the administration would have a free hand to cut specific academic programs at their whim.

No details have been released concerning which areas of Wayne State University are to be cut, and which jobs the administration now has a mind to eliminate. Margaret Winters, Associate Provost for Academic Personnel at Wayne, described a mythical department and faculty termination scenario in her comments to the press.

But there is recent and solid evidence of what could happen from elsewhere in the country. In 2010, Florida State tried to cut 21 tenured faculty members. All were ultimately retained after a judge restored the jobs of 12 of them, citing the institution's violation of limited seniority protections for professors. The judge called the university's decision-making process completely arbitrary.

One example is illustrative. Florida's anthropology department was gutted. One professor in anthropology had 38 years seniority and broad teaching experience, but was let go.

In 2010, Northwestern State in Louisiana eliminated the degree programs in chemistry and physics and released all of the department's faculty members, including six with tenure. According to an AAUP report, lower-level physics courses were to be taught by instructors, with one position advertised at \$30,000 annual pay. Tenured professors in other "low-completer programs" in economics, journalism, political science, sociology, and other liberal arts departments were also terminated.

While declaring "financial exigency" is a possibility in place in higher education to give a freer hand for layoffs of tenured faculty, "it is a cumbersome and unwelcome process," according to *Inside Higher Ed*. As to why it is not used they say: "Officials cite a variety of reasons, including concerns that bond-rating agencies or accreditors may immediately impose extra reviews, and that students and donors might be scared off."

The abrupt contract extension by AAUP officials is of a piece with the general strategy of the union leadership at Wayne State. The AAUP is doing little, if anything, to mobilize students or support staff to defend the professors.

At a small faculty rally on the downtown Detroit campus in late July, Charles J. Parrish, president of the faculty union spoke of the danger to tenure. But then union leadership met what is a clear and present danger with a call for "civil compromise." A large portion of the rally was used to drum up votes for the Democratic Party and Obama.

There is another provision that the Wayne State administration wants codified in the union contract. It would allow termination of tenured faculty for "intentionally causing injury to persons and/or damage to property, forcibly interrupting the normal daily teaching, research or administrative operation of the University or directly inciting others to engage in such actions." No doubt the administration had its eye on the developments in Quebec where a five-month-long strike by Quebec students against university tuition fee hikes continues over the summer months.

All members of the university community are under attack with rising tuition, financial aid contraction, and constant threats to specific programs. The attack on tenure can only be seen as a major step in meeting the demands of corporations who do not want to spend money on "unnecessary" and "wasteful" subjects and students. They want business-friendly courses attended by students from a more privileged demographic that can pay the price.



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