University of Illinois faculty members strike in Chicago

Our reporters
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On Tuesday, 1,100 faculty members at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) went on strike for the first time in the school's history. After 60 bargaining sessions over 16 months failed to reach an initial contract agreement, the faculty union called a two-day strike. Classes were canceled for 27,500 students at the largest university in the Chicago area.

The UIC faculty was recently organized as United Faculty Local 6456 (American Federation of Teachers), in July 2012. A federal mediator was brought into the negotiations in November 2013 after talks broke down, and in December, 95 percent of the faculty voted to authorize a walkout.

Bennie, a professor in the Germanic studies department, spoke with the WSWS while picketing on Tuesday. Discussing the university's demands, she said, "The effect is to have less full time faculty positions in favor of temporary adjuncts, which are far more disposable, without any real job security, and paid less. In this sense, we are by no means a unique case. What is happening here at UIC is happening nationwide. No matter where you go, student tuition is increasing, and young people are increasingly burdened by student debt with no real opportunities."

As is the case on many university campuses, faculty pay differs widely at UIC. Vice Chancellors and various upper-level administrators make $200,000-300,000 per year in base salary alone, along with some faculty in medicine and business. Meanwhile, a significant portion of the teaching staff—instructors and lecturers—typically earn between less than $30,000 and $50,000 per year in one of the more expensive cities to live in the US.

The university is reported to control $1.3 billion in unrestricted funds and has reportedly made $200 million in profits. It has also imposed a number of tuition hikes in recent years. Another issue in the strike is faculty involvement in university governance. In recent years, the multiplication of highly paid administrative positions—accountable to the various offices, but unaccountable to faculty and students—has created resentment among the low-paid faculty.

Bennie said, "I've been teaching here for more than ten years and over the time I have been here, the climate has really changed. In contrast to the plight of teachers and students, the administration has been ballooning. Some of these people now make 10-12 times more than full time faculty and none of them directly serves the interests of students.

"By comparison," she continued, teaching faculty positions have become less rewarding. The few token gestures in merit-based awards such as bonuses, honorary dinner receptions and pins only go to a select few, and wouldn't be needed if people were actually valued and had their pay and teaching resources reflect that.

"What you end up with is a marginal quality of higher education. More and more emphasis is placed on producing degrees in the shortest span and content rather than a well-rounded quality education. By comparison to other city and state universities, UIC has a large section of students who come from comparatively disadvantaged backgrounds, along with a large population of students from first generation immigrant families.

"If they were really investing in the quality of education for students, they should be putting money into classrooms, labs, and faculty. Many faculty from other universities look at the UIC strike are taking courage, and seeing this strike as a first step towards a larger movement to defend the interests of teachers and students in higher education."

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Standing behind the University of Illinois Board of Trustees attack on the UIC faculty is the state of Illinois, which is in the process of implementing an austerity program in every area of the budget. Most recently, the Democratic-controlled state legislature passed a law gutting pensions for state and municipal workers—including university faculty—premised on a budget crisis manufactured by both big business parties.

The attack on the right to public education is being spearheaded by the Obama administration, which has overseen the layoff of hundreds of thousands of teachers, the shutdown of more than 4,000 public schools and a doubling of the number of students enrolled in charter schools. He has also embarked on a policy to more closely tailor higher education to the needs of corporate America and imposing sweeping cost-cutting measures aimed against college faculty and other workers.

The attacks have been particularly savage in Chicago, where Obama's former chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel, has carried out the largest number of school closings in the city's history. He has also championed attacks on the pensions of state and municipal workers.

There is enormous opposition to these attacks and striking faculty members enjoy widespread sympathy. But the American Federation of Teachers (AFT)—the parent organization of the United Faculty—the SEIU and other city unions have no intention and will do nothing to mobilize the support of teachers and other workers to defend the UIC faculty. Allied with the Democratic Party, the AFT, NEA, the Chicago Teachers Union and others have collaborated in the passage of anti-teacher legislation—such as Senate Bill 7—the betrayal of the 2012 strike by 28,000 Chicago teachers and the closure of 50 public schools.

The AFT and IFT executives have no doubt insisted that the UIC strike be limited to two days so as not to upset their cozy relations with the state Democratic Party. The union executives, including AFT President Randi Weingarten—who makes more than $400,000 a year—also have the closest ties to Obama and share his plans to slash higher education costs on the backs of faculty and college employees.

In their drive to channel ever-greater amounts of society's wealth into their personal bank accounts, the American ruling class is determined to return to the days when only the sons and daughters of the wealthy had access to education. That is why the fight to defend the right to education is, above all, a struggle for social equality and a vast redistribution of wealth to meet the needs of society as a whole.

Such a fight requires the political mobilization of the broadest layers of the working class against both big business parties and the profit system they defend. To do this, UIC faculty members must organize rank-and-file committees, free from the control of the AFT and other unions, to appeal directly to the students and workers throughout Chicago, the US and internationally to defend their struggle.

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