

Long Island University-Brooklyn locks out 400 professors

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9 September 2016

Administrators at Long Island University (LIU) launched a Labor Day assault on faculty and students this past weekend, locking out over 400 full- and part-time professors at the institution's Brooklyn, New York campus. The unprecedented action directed against university faculty signals an intensification of the drive to impose a corporate education model in which success is judged by credit ratings and budget surpluses rather than a quality education.

In attempting to further convert classroom lecturers into a casual labor force, push through wage cuts and curtail academic freedom of professors, LIU took immediate action on September 1 to lock out employees as the contract with the LIU Faculty Federation, part of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), expired.

The concession demands by the university would result in draconian pay cuts of up to 35 percent in some cases. Adjunct professors would see their teaching load reduced from 12 to nine credit hours, while their classrooms are packed with more students. Pay for office hours would be eliminated under the university's proposal, as would the Adjuncts Benefits Trust Fund, which helps offset some health insurance costs. LIU further intends to establish a two-tier wage system under which new hires would be paid even less.

Full time professors are also under attack. Half of them currently make 20 percent less than their colleagues at LIU's C.W. Post campus in Brookville, New York. The administration is demanding changes to tenure, including a first of its kind post-tenure review process that would restrict academic freedom and allow administrators greater control over courses.

LIU is seeking to break the resistance of the locked-out faculty by immediately suspending health benefits for its workers. They also cut off access to university

email, a vital means of communication for many professors. Most adjuncts will not qualify for state unemployment benefits, unless their sole employment is at LIU—a rare occurrence given the low pay and lack of decent benefits for adjuncts.

Presented with the final contract offer, faculty on Tuesday defiantly rejected the concessions by a vote of 226 to 10. They also passed a motion of no confidence in the university's president, Kimberly R. Cline, and vice president for academic affairs, Jeffrey Kane, by a similar overwhelming margin.

Negotiations over the contract had been proceeding since April. Despite the fact that there was no movement towards a settlement and a strike authorization vote by faculty in May, the union planned no job action, expecting professors to return to classes and keep teaching without a contract this past Wednesday. However, the spinelessness of the union did not prevent LIU from taking the initiative. It prepared for a lockout over the course of months, reaching out to adjuncts at other schools and placing ads in job web sites in an attempt to recruit scabs. In the end, the university announced it had hired 140 replacement teachers. Where their scab operation has come up short, the administration is requiring non-locked-out staff, often grossly unqualified, to step in as teachers.

Other unions at LIU, including four at the Brooklyn campus presently working without a contract and the AFT faculty union at the Post campus, remain on the job. LIU is counting on this continued strikebreaking by the union leadership to isolate the Brooklyn faculty.

The lockout is a preemptive attack aimed at heading off a growing mood of militancy among workers, including, but not limited to, the Brooklyn faculty. LIU professors have struck during five out of the last six

contracts, most recently for six days in 2011. LIU-Brooklyn lies just one block away from a major Verizon call center, where workers walked out for 40 days this spring. Public education workers across the country, from Detroit to Chicago, are taking action to defend jobs and improve conditions for their students.

Key to the LIU administration strategy is to drive a wedge between teachers and students. LIU vice president Kane authored a letter to students as the lockout began claiming that “every dollar spent on faculty salaries and benefits is a dollar not spent on student scholarships, new labs and facilities for safety.”

The reality is that both students and teachers are targets of a nationwide attack on education. Tuition at this private university has soared to nearly \$35,000 per year, not including room, board and other fees, which easily amount to another \$15,000. LIU students, like their counterparts at other public and private colleges, typically rack up tens, if not hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt seeking a degree.

Meanwhile, LIU is relying ever more on a pool of adjunct professors for classroom instruction. Already, more than half of the course offerings are taught by this highly exploited section of academics, reflecting a national trend. Adjuncts are typically forced to take jobs at multiple schools in order to make ends meet. They’re under-compensated and with little or no benefits in terms of health care, retirement and job protections. Tenure tracks are being eliminated and the rights of tenured faculty watered down.

Universities are being subject to the discipline of the market. At LIU this took the form of a series of financial crises spanning most of the past decade. President Cline was brought on in large part due to her previous experience imposing cuts on students and faculty, first as president of Mercy College, then as CFO/COO in the State University of New York system. As LIU faced the danger of its credit rating being downgraded to junk status, Cline doubled down on a program of cutbacks, layoffs and administrative changes. Even as the budget outlook of LIU improved, Cline continued the assault, setting a precedent for similar attacks on university faculty across the United States.

Behind these attacks is a systematic withholding of funds from universities and school districts. Both political parties insist that resources for education must

be cut, not increased, while vast sums are diverted to the military. The Obama administration has spearheaded an attack on public education, encouraging such reactionary measures as merit pay and the spread of charters through its Race to the Top program.

This framework is accepted by the AFT, which seeks only to have a say in where and how cuts are carried out. The hostility of the AFT to any struggle to defend education is exemplified by its all-out support to the right-wing campaign of Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton. It is determined to isolate and strangle any independent struggle by educators that will interfere with its campaign for the Democrats.

The prerequisite for a serious struggle against the attacks on education is a break with the AFT and the forging of new, democratic organizations of struggle to mobilize all sections of the working class, students and the unemployed against the attack on education.



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