

Faculty set October 19 strike date at Pennsylvania universities

Samuel Davidson
6 October 2016

Professors and faculty members at Pennsylvania's 14 state-run universities have voted overwhelmingly to go on strike October 19 if a contract is not reached by that time. The 5,500 professors and faculty have been working without a contract for more than 16 months. Coaches have also voted to join the walkout.

Faculty members are resisting cuts to their health benefits and declining living standards, and the expanded use of low-paid temporary or adjunct professors.

The Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PSSHE) manages 14 universities located throughout the state, all the state's public four-year colleges except Penn State, which operates separately. The PSSHE is demanding more than \$70 million in cuts to health care, including forcing faculty members to pay increased premiums and co-pays and higher deductibles.

The universities are also demanding that faculty get no pay raise for last year, a \$600 cash payment for this year and a 1 percent pay raise for each of the academic years 2017-2018 and 2018-2019. In addition, the university has offered a 2.5 to 5.0 percent payment in the last year of the contract, with junior faculty receiving the larger percentage. Even with the one-time payment, wage rises would fall below the rate of inflation.

However, by far the largest issue is the expanded use of temporary or adjunct professors to teach courses. Currently, universities in the PSSHE are permitted to have 25 percent of their courses taught by adjunct professors. The state is proposing to increase this to 30 percent, with exceptions granted at specific locations for an even greater number of adjunct professors.

Adjunct professors are paid \$5,838 per three-credit course, meaning a professor who teaches a full load of four courses per semester for the entire year, something

that rarely happens, would earn at most \$46,700 a year. Most often, the adjunct will get far fewer classes and earn much less.

In addition to teaching courses, adjunct professors are expected to take part in the campus community with service work and must do their own research. An adjunct professor is not a tenured position, and they can be dismissed at any time. The state is also seeking to add a fifth course to their workload with no increase in pay.

In a statement published on the web site of the Association of Pennsylvania State College & University Faculties, which represents the professors, Dr. Jamie Martin, the association vice president and the chair of the negotiating team, reported that management was seeking to "turn our temporary faculty into 'teaching machines' by suggesting that their salaries be cut or their workload be increased by 20 percent."

Another proposal from PSSHE management that has been withdrawn would have allowed graduate students who had not yet even earned their master's degrees to teach courses.

The state system is also seeking to increase the number of online courses, making them the only means for obtaining a degree in many majors, not just an option for students.

About 100,000 students attend universities in the PSSHE, located in the towns of Bloomsburg, California, Cheyney, Clarion, East Stroudsburg, Edinboro, Indiana, Kutztown, Lock Haven, Mansfield, Millersville, Shippensburg, Slippery Rock, and West Chester. Since 2008, the PSSHE has cut 900 faculty positions and seen a decline in over 100 programs offered.

Driving the universities to seek these and other attacks on faculty and students are the drastic cuts to

both K-12 and higher education made over the past eight years under both Democratic and Republican state administrations. Since the 2007-2008 school year, state funding per student has fallen 33 percent. State funding for the system is at the same level as in 1999, with no allowance for inflation.

Pennsylvania has three levels of public higher education. In addition to the 14 universities that make up the PSSHE, there are 4 state-supported universities: Penn State University, the University of Pittsburgh, Temple University and Lincoln University. The state also provides funding for a network of community colleges run by the county governments.

In the 2011-2012 year, Republican Governor Tom Corbett made drastic cuts to education, slashing nearly \$1 billion from K-12 public schools and over half a billion from the state's allotment to higher education.

Democrat Tom Wolf won the 2014 election primarily on the promise to restore the cuts to public education. However, he has continued and deepened the attack on public education.

According to the Pennsylvania Budget and Policy Center overview of the 2016-2017 budget, "In higher education, the Governor's budget would restore only about a quarter of the (nominal dollar—unadjusted for inflation) funding cut of 2011-12. This is too little to substantially lift Pennsylvania from its 49th rank for state investment in higher education and too little to stem the continuing rise of tuition and student debt."

The accumulated cuts, just for all higher education, amount to over \$2 billion. Overall, the state share of the budget for the State System of Higher Education has fallen from 50 percent to just over 25 percent. When the system was founded, 33 years ago, state funding accounted for 75 percent of its budget. Student tuition, fees and room and board average nearly \$20,000 a year and account for the majority of the system's budget.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact