

Professors and faculty threaten to strike at 14 Pennsylvania universities

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The union at 14 universities in Pennsylvania is seeking a last-minute deal to prevent a strike Wednesday by 5,500 professors and staff at the state-run university system.

Negotiations between the Association of Pennsylvania State College & University Faculties (APSCUF) and the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education, which manages the 14 schools, resumed Friday.

After first reporting no progress on Friday evening, APSCUF imposed a media embargo, only stating that they will continue negotiations right up to the Wednesday morning strike deadline. Media embargoes are commonly used as a union seeks to work out a deal behind the backs of their members.

Last month, faculty members, who have been working without a contract since June of 2015, voted by over 93 percent to authorize a strike. The strike date of Wednesday, October 19 was set. It would be the first strike in the state system's 34-year history.

More than 100,000 students attend universities in the state-run system, with schools located in Bloomsburg, California, Cheyney, Clarion, East Stroudsburg, Edinboro, Indiana, Kutztown, Lock Haven, Mansfield, Millersville, Shippensburg, Slippery Rock and West Chester.

Faculty members are fighting cuts to their health benefits, declining living standard, the expanded use of low-paid temporary or adjunct professors, and the proliferation of online courses used to cut back on classroom instruction.

The state is demanding that employees take major cuts to health insurance, including increased deductibles and a co-insurance plan that will require employees to pay higher premiums as healthcare costs rise.

The universities are also demanding that faculty get no pay increase raise for last year, a \$600 cash payment for this year, and a 1 percent pay raise for each of the 2017-18 and 2018-19 years of the four-year contract. In addition, the university has offered a 2.5 to 5 percent payment in the last year of the contract, with junior faculty receiving the larger percentage. Even with the one-time payment, wages would fall below the rate of inflation.

However, the most significant issue is the expanded use of temporary or adjunct professors to teach courses and the expanded use of online courses in all majors.

Under the old contract, APSCUF had agreed to allow the universities to have 25 percent of their courses taught by adjunct professors. Recent figures show that several schools have reached that percentage, and most are very close. 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 would be required to teach five courses per semester on top of their other duties, including research and publishing. This amounts to an effective pay cut of 20 percent. The state had proposed allowing graduate students to teach courses, but has since withdrawn that proposal.

In addition, the state wants to expand online courses at the expense of classroom teaching. The effect would mean that many students would have to take online courses to meet their major requirements.

The APSCUF has sought to channel opposition behind the Democratic Party administration of Governor Tom Wolf, with calls that he intervene on their behalf with the State System board to provide the resources to adequately fund higher education in Pennsylvania.

Governor Wolf made rhetorical statements about

defending public education during his 2014 election campaign and since, but has done nothing to ensure funding.

Since becoming governor, Wolf has not restored the cuts made to education by his predecessors over the previous eight years. Since the 2007-08 school year, state funding per student has fallen 33 percent and is now at the same level as 1999. Since 2008, over 900 faculty positions have been cut and the number of programs offered has been slashed by 100.

Pennsylvania is ranked 49th in the country in state support for higher education.

The determination of professors and faculty members to fight for a decent contract is part of a growing wave of struggles by workers throughout Pennsylvania and around the country. Members of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra are entering the third week of their strike against a demand that they take 15 percent pay cut.

Some 5,700 transit workers in the Philadelphia region have also voted to strike if a contract is not reached by the end of this month.



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