

Faculty strike at University of Illinois-Springfield

Alexander Fangmann

4 May 2017

Tenured and tenure-track faculty at the University of Illinois-Springfield (UIS) went on strike Tuesday, largely over the refusal of the University of Illinois administration to incorporate protections for promotion and tenure into the contract.

UIS faculty are hoping to force the university to move more quickly in negotiations over what is to be their first contract. The university has so far managed to drag the process out over the course of 20 months since the union, UIS United Faculty, which is affiliated with the Illinois Federation of Teachers (IFT), was certified in February of 2015.

The strike began Tuesday morning, and will likely wipe out the final week of class for many courses, as the next bargaining session between the union and administration is scheduled for Friday. Final exams are scheduled to occur the following week.

The results of the strike authorization vote were announced on April 14, and according to the union, faculty voted “overwhelmingly” to approve striking, although vote totals have not been released. There are 168 tenured and tenure-track faculty at UIS.

Kristi Barnwell, a history professor at UIS and vice-president of the union, stated, “We did not want it to come to this, but Chancellor Koch and the U of I administration forced the strike by dragging its feet and playing games at the bargaining table. Our students deserve this to be settled and we hope that management will change course and agree to a deal that's fair to the faculty, our students, and the community.”

Negotiations between the two sides apparently broke down on Monday. According to Barnwell, on Friday the union “proposed a committee made up of faculty and administrators from within UIS who would examine cases where the personnel policy has been violated in cases of reappointment, tenure, and

promotion.” After initially seeming open to the idea, they then “backed out” of discussions on it.

On its own FAQ regarding the strike, the U of I clearly states its opposition to including any language relating to appointment, reappointment, tenure and promotion in faculty contracts at any of its campuses, claiming, “Including the tenure and promotion process in a union contract would open such decisions to grievance procedures involving outside judgments by an arbitrator who may have little or no knowledge of the university and whose participation could potentially undermine the Board of Trustees’ ultimate responsibility for confirming such decisions.”

Indeed, the ultimately capricious nature of the Board of Trustees and its decisions is no doubt precisely why the UIS faculty are seeking protections of this kind. Members of the U of I board are appointed by the state governor, and are routinely chosen for their wealth and political connections. Not one of the members of the current board has any substantial experience in higher education, but represent the interests of the banks, private equity, and agribusiness, among others.

In recent years, under the leadership of former university board chairman Christopher Kennedy, the son of Robert F. Kennedy and current Democratic candidate for governor of Illinois, the board made several attacks on tenure and academic freedom. The most substantial of these was the board’s 2014 vote to rescind a tenured job offer at the Urbana-Champaign campus to Steven Salaita over tweets he made that were critical of Israeli government policies against Palestinians, effectively destroying Salaita’s academic career. The university ultimately settled Salaita’s resulting lawsuits for \$875,000.

In the same year, the university board also demanded that James Kilgore, an adjunct instructor at Urbana-

Champaign, be fired for his former participation in the Symbionese Liberation Army. According to a report from the American Association of University Professors, his job was only saved because administrators were fearful of repercussions after the Salaita decision.

Back in 2010, Kennedy also worked to make sure that Bill Ayers, former radical and Weather Underground member, was denied emeritus status after retiring as a professor from the University of Illinois-Chicago, for personal and political reasons. In explaining his decision, Kennedy referred to Ayers' lack of remorse over his actions in the 1970s, and particularly over the inclusion of a dedication to Sirhan Sirhan, his father's assassin, in a book Ayers co-authored with other members of the Weather Underground.

Faculty at UIS claim they are merely trying to get the official current policy on tenure and promotion back into the contract, as it was before 1995 when the former Sangamon State University was taken over by the University of Illinois to become UIS.

Aside from job protections, faculty are also seeking higher wages. Associate Professor of Health Heather Dell told local media, "I've worked here for 17 years and I've really never gotten a raise." Average faculty pay at UIS is much lower than at the other U of I campuses, with the lowest paid assistant professors making about \$50,000 per year in positions often requiring a PhD or other advanced degrees.

Tenured and tenure-track faculty at UIS were recently left out of a wage increase announced in December that was supposed to apply to faculty across the U of I system currently without a contract.

There is no doubt that under Governor Bruce Rauner, who has opposed employment protections of for public employees, the attacks on tenure and academic freedom will continue. This strike also occurs in the middle of a budget impasse, which has drastically reduced funding and caused enrollment declines at all public community colleges and universities, including UIS.

The starving of Illinois higher education is part of a concerted effort by the corporate and financial elite to dismantle public education at all levels and turn back the clock to the days when only the children of the wealthy could hope for an education.

UIS faculty should beware of any attempts by the Democratic Party, which has spearheaded the attack on

public education, with the collusion of the American Federation of Teachers and its state and local affiliates. They should organize rank-and-file committees to take control of the strike and appeal directly to other workers in Springfield, the US and internationally to support their fight.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact