

Eastern Michigan University staff, students protest staffing cuts

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19 March 2018

On Thursday, March 15, dozens of Eastern Michigan University (EMU) staff members, faculty, and students protested the school administration's announcement that it was cutting nearly 60 staff positions from the university.

The protest against the cuts comes as educators and students across the country have mobilized in defense of public education, in opposition to administrators, Democratic and Republican politicians, and the unions that falsely claim to represent educators' interests.

EMU President James Smith first announced the cuts in an email to the campus community in January, claiming that the cuts were necessary to address a 2018 budget deficit of \$4.5 to \$5.5 million, which Smith blamed on declining enrollment. The cuts consist of the elimination of 42 open positions and the laying off of 17 current staff members.

In recent years, the university's budgetary shortfalls have been used as justifications for a series of attacks on EMU staff and students, including an attempt to cut part-time lecturers' pay by 25 percent, tuition hikes for students, and the privatization of parking and dining services. Moreover, these measures are in tandem with the attack on public schools and universities throughout the United States and internationally, with cuts to public education used to fund massive tax breaks for the wealthy and increases in military spending.

The EMU administration has been aided in its austerity drive by the faculty unions, which have worked to demobilize and isolate opposition with a series of fruitless "safety-valve" demonstrations designed to channel anger behind the Democratic Party.

The March 15 demonstration was called by the EMU American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and the EMU Federation of Teachers (EMU-FT). The demonstration was largely confined to the area around the campus's administrative building. Speakers included

AAUP President Judith Kullberg, as well as a number of Democratic Party politicians, including two candidates for Michigan governor, Bill Cobbs and Abdul El-Sayed.

Cobbs and El-Sayed offered nothing more than threadbare platitudes and empty promises of solidarity. They pledged to "stand with" EMU faculty and staff, as though Democratic politicians were any less culpable than Republicans in the decades-long attack on public education. It was the Democratic administration of President Barack Obama, after all, that sharply intensified the class-based attack on education through the pro-charter school Race to the Top program. The Trump administration, in turn, has built upon the work of Obama and further intensified the gutting of education spending and the expansion of for-profit charter schools.

Kullberg's speech included what she characterized as an "alternate plan" to the administration's cuts. However, she operated from essentially the same starting point as the university administration, claiming that budget cuts were necessary for EMU to become "sustainable." She called instead for a reduction of "administrative bloat" and for cuts to the university's athletics program. Nowhere in her speech did she attempt to link the struggles of EMU staff, faculty, and students with those of educators and students across the country, or even with those at the nearby University of Michigan, where lecturers are currently discussing strike action for higher pay.

Internationally, educators are coming into increasing conflict with the union bureaucracies that falsely claim to represent them. Earlier this month, the West Virginia teachers strike, in which 30,000 teachers and other school employees participated in a statewide action that shut down all the public schools in the state, was waged in opposition to the teachers' unions, which worked to impose a sellout deal reached with that state's billionaire governor. In the United Kingdom, striking university

lecturers have rebelled against attempts by the University and College Union to impose a sellout of their own.

Members of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality at EMU attended the demonstration and spoke with students and faculty.

One student, Mindy, denounced the cuts, saying, “Our president is currently making \$400,000 a year and cutting 60 positions, and probably more than that. He continues to invest in his own salary rather than investing in the school and investing in the students. We’re here to bring attention to it and let him know that we’re not going to stand for that.

“I work in DCI, Diversity and Community Involvement. We have been really seething over losing our administrative assistant. She is the glue at DCI. She keeps us together. And if we lost her, DCI would fall apart. So many other positions like that are being cut throughout EMU, while President Smith, who literally doesn’t do anything, continues to make six-figure salaries to pay for all his homes.”

Mindy spoke about the hardship that tuition hikes have had on her goals. “I’m going to be a senior next year. I want to get my master’s. I want to have a home someday, get married. Basically, these really humble dreams. And I fear that without scholarships I won’t be able to finish my degree. And then what? What do I do with my life after that? It ultimately has a huge effect on my life, and the lives of millions of college students across the country.”

Another student, Faith, spoke about the impact of the tuition hikes on the student body. “Every student here has multiple jobs. We all work to pay for our tuition. We don’t get free money. It’s really infuriating that I am working really hard to pay for a man’s six-figure salary.

“The home that [University President Smith] lives in is a university home, so it’s already paid for. He doesn’t pay rent or anything like that. But thousands of students who go here have to find a little hole to live in, and pay ridiculous rent, and utilities, and all these ridiculous prices.”

She rejected the university administration’s claim that there is no money to pay for essential staff. “I don’t believe them. It’s not a popular opinion to have, to just say they’re straight up lying. But I just think they’re straight up lying to us. Every decision the board of regents makes is somehow unanimous. They’re having meetings outside of their scheduled meetings, which are documented. We’re supposed to be able to read what goes on in the meetings, but they’re obviously having meetings outside of that. There’s money. There’s

politics. There’s all this stuff involved that we don’t get to see. And then all of a sudden they have unanimous decisions on everything. That’s just not true.”

IYSSE members also spoke to two faculty members who wished to remain anonymous. One faculty member denounced the cutting of essential staff, which has already had a severe impact on educators’ ability to effectively teach. “Our essential administrative assistant has been cut. So it’s hitting very close to home for us...We rely on the essential work that they do. We basically cease to function in the same capacity without their positions in place. They’re the people who should be protected. Those jobs should be protected, not seen to be expendable.”

Another faculty member denounced the growing levels of social inequality, which have contributed to attacks on education and health care. “The inequality between the rich and the poor, the big difference there that grows more and more, it’s really hard. The ratio is not equal. And that’s why the difference has become bigger, and bigger, and bigger. I think it’s a crime. I always feel like it is a crime that I cannot tolerate. Education for all students and health care are the two things that get me really upset. Those are the things that I feel are important. Education is the tool for mobility. And they make education so expensive.

“I think everyone has the right to get a good, decent education and enjoy a happy life. And the other major issue is health insurance. This is something that I’m very passionate about. It’s about human life. It’s unethical to deny a medical service because someone cannot pay.”

The fight to defend public education cannot be waged within the confines of the trade union apparatus or the Democratic Party. The IYSSE at EMU urges educators and staff to form independent rank-and-file committees that will fight to link up the struggles of EMU staff and students with those of educators, health care workers, factory workers, and workers across the country and internationally. Only a broad-based movement of the international working class and youth can fight back against cuts and secure the right to education for all.



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