

Wright State University faculty in Dayton, Ohio to strike Tuesday

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Faculty at Wright State University (WSU), which serves about 18,000 students, are scheduled to strike next Tuesday, the start of the second week of classes. The university is located in the southwest Ohio city of Dayton, which has been ravaged by deindustrialization, having lost 3,500 manufacturing businesses and tens of thousands of manufacturing jobs since 2001.

The walkout follows a January 4 decision by the WSU board of trustees to impose an all-out austerity contract on WSU faculty. The measures being demanded by the administration would not only undermine the quality of public education at Wright State but set a terrible regressive precedent in the evisceration of higher education nationally.

WSU faculty have been working without a contract since June 2017. In early November 2018, a fact-finder issued a report echoing the administration's claim that dire fiscal circumstances compelled them to inflict deep cuts on faculty pay and benefits. The American Association of University Professors chapter at Wright State University (AAUP-WSU), whose bargaining unit includes 564 of the university's 1,700 faculty, overwhelmingly rejected this provocation. Now the university has refused to bargain.

Instead, the university has imposed a deal which calls for a total pay freeze over the course of the three-year contract, a de facto pay cut. The administration also plans to increase healthcare premium co-pays between 45 percent or 80 percent, depending on the plan. Yearly deductibles will also increase from \$500 to \$1,600, with out-of-pocket maximums jumping from 50 percent to 128 percent. The university has already imposed these drastic measures on university support staff.

The university is also demanding the right to furlough faculty for two or more days per semester, depending on their "Senate Bill 6 score," a measure by which

Ohio calculates the fiscal health of its public higher education institutions. Since faculty would still be expected to teach all the same number of classes, grade and meet with students, as well as conduct the same research, the furloughs would amount to requiring faculty to do unpaid work.

The University administration has also claimed the absolute right to set faculty workloads, which could mean requiring them to teach more classes per semester or pack more students into every class. Not only would this make research, often necessary for tenure, all but impossible to accomplish, it would also result in a sharp decline in education standards for WSU students. They would have less access to faculty as well as fewer professors engaged in the cutting edge of developments in their respective fields.

One faculty member noted on social media, "The imposed contract says they alone have the right to determine workload. So they can give us as many classes as they want. The Provost has said she will keep the status quo, but why should we believe anything the Admin tells us?"

New requirements for promotion and "continuing employment" for non-tenure-track faculty would also raise the number of years before continuing employment status is granted from six to nine years. Non-tenure-track faculty would also have to attain the highest rank available to them, Senior Lecturer, before attaining "continuing employment," meaning lecturers and new hires would have to wait 12 years.

The new terms would also introduce a merit pay system which would allow administrators to award or deny one-time bonuses to anyone having a 2.0 annual evaluation score, which is nearly all faculty. This would mean deans and department chairs would have a free hand to play favorites, dispense "punishment" or

inordinately pressure subordinates.

Even though the faculty approved the strike on January 13 by an overwhelming 85 percent margin, the university administration has given no signal that it intends to compromise. Throughout negotiations, it has maintained an aggressive posture, including a willingness to bring in “substitutes,” or scabs, and to combine classes. As one faculty member noted on Facebook, “Yeah, it seems that they ‘have this covered’ by bringing in admins to do the jobs of professors.”

On Monday, the AAUP negotiator offered to withdraw the union’s unfair labor practice complaint with the State Employment Relations Board (SERB) in exchange for a written agreement to rescind the imposed contract. The university again took a hard line, stating they would negotiate a “successor” contract to the current imposed terms only if the complaint were dismissed with prejudice—that is, if they agreed it could never be filed again.

The university is determined to make the imposed terms the baseline for any further negotiations. Not only that, in offering to bargain only on a successor agreement, the administration no doubt hopes to drag talks as long as possible toward, or even past, the 2020 expiration of the imposed terms.

The administration has, moreover, sent faculty members individual emails asking them if they plan to strike. By taking the lack of response as intent to strike, the administration is threatening to trigger a suspension of pay and healthcare benefits.

The administration claims they must cut \$53 million from the university’s budget in this fiscal year and stabilize the “structural” budget deficit, despite finishing last year’s budget with a \$10 million surplus. Commenting on the imposed contract, WSU President Cheryl Schrader said, “The employment terms are fair in light of our unprecedented financial crisis, and the actions we have taken to respond to the crisis.”

Schrader’s compensation in 2017 amounted to \$685,000 in salary and perks, excluding healthcare and retirement benefits, while Scott Nagy, the basketball coach, was paid \$502,719. Other administrators were also paid high salaries, including Provost Thomas Sudkamp, who made \$345,470. Double Bowler Properties COO Greg Sample, who runs a university-affiliated “non-profit” that allows the university to

make less-regulated purchases and sales in the real estate market, took in \$249,375.

The AAUP-WSU rejected the university’s offer to bargain over the successor contract, with union president Martin Kich saying, “No, and the reason is obvious. Our members didn’t vote to strike over the next contract.”

Despite Kich’s acknowledgment that the strike represents a complete rejection of the WSU administration’s plans, the AAUP is not seeking to mobilize faculty support from throughout Ohio, much less nationally. In fact, the union’s unfair labor practices complaint opposes the administration’s public airing of the talks, rather than the established policy of keeping everything behind closed doors. The union would prefer that faculty, staff and students be kept in the dark—the better to conclude a rotten deal.

The struggle at Wright State is part of the escalating national and international movement of teachers and workers against decades of attacks and austerity. Faculty members determined to defend their standard of living should pay careful attention to the struggle of teachers in Los Angeles and study the pernicious role of the unions in sabotaging teachers struggles during last year’s strike wave in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona and Washington state. At every turn, the unions have torpedoed these strikes and insisted that educators subordinate their demands to what the Democrats (and Republicans) find acceptable.

The intransigence of the Wright State administration is a warning on the ongoing destruction of public education. Faculty should begin organizing themselves independently as a rank-and-file committee, outside of the auspices of the AAUP, linking up their struggle with that of teachers in LA, the rebellion of workers in Matamoros, Mexico, and other workers around the world.



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