

Wright State University reaches tentative agreement with faculty enshrining health and pay cuts

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On Sunday, February 10, negotiators for the Wright State University (WSU) administration and faculty union announced they had reached a tentative agreement ending the 20-day strike of approximately 560 full-time faculty. Rather than a victory, the agreement codifies most of the demands made by the university's administrators and board of trustees, and should be rejected by faculty with the contempt it deserves.

Faculty at WSU, a public university in Dayton, Ohio with approximately 18,000 students, had been on strike for 20 days following the university administration's imposition of a contract on January 4 which represented an all-out assault on working conditions, pay and other benefits. The strike, which was the second-longest public university strike in US history, received immense support from students and other educators, and substantially impacted university operations.

Although the American Association of University Professors chapter at Wright State University (AAUP-WSU) initially rejected the university's offer to begin negotiating a successor agreement to the imposed contract, on the grounds that they were striking in opposition to the imposed contract, in the end the union capitulated on this point and allowed it to be the starting point for the agreement that was eventually reached. Indeed, the agreement takes the form of two consecutive successor agreements. One would take effect February 10 and last through June 30, 2020, while the next one runs from July 1, 2020 through June 30, 2023.

Among the biggest concessions made by the union was in relation to health care, which played a big role in the wide support for the strike from faculty, and the 85

percent margin of the strike authorization vote. From the beginning, the university administration demanded the faculty be placed on the same health care plan that it had forced onto other university staff members. Additionally, they also demanded the right to be able to essentially change health care benefits whenever convenient.

While the university agreed to keep faculty on the same healthcare plan through June of 2020, the agreement gives the university the ability to raise rates for premiums and out-of-pocket costs by up to 35 percent after that point, which would have a substantial personal financial impact on many faculty.

The union has argued that the new agreement preserves the right to bargain over healthcare benefits in the future. As Marty Kich, AAUP-WSU president stated, "No fact-finder is going to be able to look at it and say: 'they gave up their right to bargain over health care.'"

In other words, the concern is more to preserve a role for the union in the future, rather than any tangible benefit to faculty. A recently released report by the university projects it will take 20 years for finances to recover, meaning the university will no doubt come back demanding austerity by the end of these contracts, if not before.

The union also agreed to a de facto three-year pay cut for faculty during the first three years of the contracts, with a miserly 2.5 percent increase for each of the last two years. This means that, taking inflation into account, faculty will see their purchasing power continue to erode, while their real take home pay is cut by increased health care costs.

Additionally, since summer teaching pay, which

some faculty rely on to make ends meet, will also be cut 15 to 20 percent, the raise for many faculty will be largely illusory. And that is without considering that the union agreed faculty would not receive back pay for money lost during the strike, or the one furlough day per semester contained in the tentative agreement. For faculty, a furlough day is essentially the same thing as a simple pay cut, because faculty still do all the same work regardless of whether they are on campus or not.

While some of the more onerous provisions demanded by the administration did not make it into the final agreement, such as the ability of the administration to unilaterally increase faculty workload or dole out merit pay, and the increase to 12 years from 8 years before non-tenured faculty received continuing appointments, their removal amounts to a fig leaf covering up the real assault on faculty and public education that is represented by the final agreement.

Although faculty are no doubt excited to get back to teaching, the tentative agreement and end to the strike resolve none of the issues over which faculty voted to strike. Faculty at WSU should reject the tentative agreement and begin the process of building a rank-and-file committee to continue the strike and reach out to other educators and workers in Dayton, across the US and around the world for support.



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