

# Rutgers University faculty in New Jersey votes to strike

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25 March 2019

Teaching faculty at Rutgers University, including professors and graduate student teachers, voted last week by 88 percent for strike action to demand an increase in wages, smaller class sizes and other improvements across the university's three campuses.

The Rutgers chapter of the American Association of University Professors-American Federation of Teachers (AAUP-AFT) has said it is preparing for a strike and starting Monday faculty will begin scheduling times for pickets in different locations around the large campus. There has never been a strike of faculty at Rutgers in its 253-year history, and this is the first strike authorization vote in 15 years.

The faculty at Rutgers have been working without a contract since last June. The union has met with university officials 33 times over the last 12 months but only "a few hours of time a month," according to the union, which says at least two more meetings are scheduled before the end of the month.

More than 2,100 full-time professors, 2,000 part-time teachers, and 906 graduate student teaching assistants are union members, about half of the 8,500 full-time and part-time faculty across the three campuses.

At the end of 2018, 24 contracts covering faculty at the university expired. Since then, five contracts have been negotiated, with an average of a 3 percent raise, but against a 1.3 percent cost of living rise in the area, this means a real increase of a meager 1.7 percent.

The demands of the faculty include raising the base pay of the student teachers, closing the gap between pay at the three Rutgers campuses—faculty at New Brunswick are paid better than colleagues at the Camden and Newark campuses—and equalizing the wages of female faculty with male faculty who have the same amount of teaching experience.

Graduate student teaching assistants are also demanding a raise of their base pay, which has remained at the

poverty wage of \$26,000 a year for the past five years. The university administration has previously rejected the demand for a \$15 per hour wage for student teachers. Erica Cho, a graduate student teacher, told the media, "I get paid around \$2,000 a month and with my rent and my bills and all of that, I have maybe like \$500 for my own spending."

Class size is also a central issue. The number of undergraduate students has risen since 1998 by 40 percent, from 35,705 to 49,861, but the number of tenure track faculty has remained the same, 2,110. Faculty are demanding the hiring of more teachers as well as more librarians to address an imbalance in the library system.

There is widespread hostility among the faculty to President Robert Barchi, who since 2012 has overseen changes in spending allocations and pushed for increases in tuition and the downsizing of staff.

Calls for a strike by the teaching faculty circulated in December when Barchi received a raise from the University Board of Directors. At the time, the Board of Directors was offering a 1.5 percent raise to faculty, which was met with outrage. Barchi's current salary is \$676,000.

On March 4, 70 distinguished professors signed a petition calling out the changes in resource allocation and budgets that Barchi has overseen over the last seven years. Titled "Barchi's Rutgers and Ours: A Statement by Rutgers' Distinguished Professors," the petition calls out the fortunes spent on the salaries of administrators, tens of millions of dollars deficit for the athletic department and a decrease in the number of student teachers. Some 133 university administrators who are not teachers earned more than \$250,000 a year.

The petition highlights many of the major concerns by teachers and illustrates the pressure on the staff. "Although about 3,000 adjunct faculty do over half of the undergraduate teaching at Rutgers, the administration

devotes less than one percent of its budget to their compensation.”

Last week, faculty organized a picket outside the meeting of the Board of Administrators, which Barchi attended, and held a sit-in in a campus building. Since then, pressure for immediate action has been growing, and on Friday the union announced on Facebook concrete preparations for organizing picketing time. The union has also scheduled a meeting of departmental representatives for Monday, March 25, billed as “Let’s Talk Strike.” But it has still not set a strike date.

The vote for a strike at Rutgers is part of a broad, international offensive of the working class. Mass anti-austerity protests have shaken the French ruling class so badly that President Macron has now called out the army with orders to shoot to kill. Since last spring, American teachers have walked off their jobs in unprecedented numbers in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Washington, Arizona, Los Angeles and Oakland against low wages and large class sizes. They have called for the prioritization of the education of their students by local and state governments. Similar movements among educators have occurred in Argentina, Brazil, Kenya, South Africa, Britain and the Netherlands. A mass uprising is now taking place in Algeria, led by the working class.

But as educators are coming into conflict with Democratic- and Republican-controlled state and local governments, the biggest block holding them back are the corporatist unions that claim to represent their interests, but whose priority is an alliance with the big-business Democratic Party.

Faculty should be alert when the Rutgers AAUP-AFT in its Strike “Frequently Asked Questions” (FAQ) notes that “the results of a successful strike can be profound, as we saw in 2018 with the victorious K-12 teachers’ walkouts from West Virginia to Arizona.”

This is a lie. None of these strikes achieved their goals, and while they were motivated and organized by rank-and-file teachers, they were shut down as soon as the unions could gain control. In Oakland, the school board enacted \$27 million in budget cuts the day after the Oakland Education Association ended the strike.

Furthermore, the FAQ notes that while it is not illegal for public employees to strike in New Jersey, a court injunction can order them back to work. Rutgers faculty should recall that when the Jersey City teachers struck last year, the union, the New Jersey Education Association, immediately caved after such an injunction was issued on the second day of the strike and signed a rotten contract

with the city.

On March 5, thousands of teachers, students and parents protested in Trenton against the wide-ranging changes in state aid to education funding by Democratic Governor Phil Murphy. The AFT and the AAUP-AFT endorsed Murphy, the multi-millionaire former Goldman Sachs financier, with AAUP-AFT vice president David Hughes declaring at the time, “Phil stands with us in higher education.” Murphy has also nominated billionaire hedge fund manager Amy Towers for a seat on the university’s Board of Governors, a move that has generated widespread opposition from Rutgers faculty.

In October, graduate students at Columbia University who had affiliated with the United Auto Workers union were betrayed by the UAW when it met with the university administration without the knowledge of its members and made changes to their contract, including a no-strike clause. The UAW is now in the process of allowing mass layoffs at General Motors plants to go forward in the US under conditions where the union leadership that negotiated the widely-despised 2015 contract has been indicted for receiving bribes.

While the Rutgers AAUP-AFT may be forced to call a strike, faculty at the university should have no illusions that the union will conduct a struggle for the goals that it is trumpeting. The American Federation of Teachers has been one of the principal organizers of a series of sell-outs of teacher strikes across the US.

A successful strike at Rutgers will need to be expanded to all university employees and to all educators in New Jersey. It will need to be conducted independently of and opposed to both the union and the Democratic and Republican politicians and will need to seek the closest ties with educators in the US and internationally. For this, faculty at Rutgers must form a rank-and-file strike committee independent of the AAUP-AFT to prepare and conduct the strike.



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