

Community College of Philadelphia faculty vote for strike action

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A strike of 1,200 faculty members looms at the Community College of Philadelphia (CCP), after nearly three years of failed talks and two years of working without a new contract. The plight of the college's highly-educated professors and instructors was summed up by one teacher who told CBSPhilly, "I've been here 18 years, and I don't make \$14 an hour. I have to work three jobs, I do a whole lot to make ends meet."

An overwhelming 91 percent of American Federation of Teachers (AFT) Local 206 voted in February to authorize a strike. Last Tuesday, the union made a "pre-strike offer" to the college administration in an attempt to reach a compromise but were rebuffed. On Wednesday, the faculty voted to hold a strike within days but the union did not set a timetable. "We don't have a specific date for when we will walk out, but if we don't see any progress in the coming days we will be on strike," union co-president Junior Brainard stated.

Lengthy negotiation sessions continued Sunday and Monday. The college has said it proffered its final offer last May and is prepared to keep the school open in the event of a strike. "There is always a possibility," Donald "Guy" Generals, college president told the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. "As you know, we are pretty far apart."

In January, Generals threatened to impose a five-year proposed contract on union members. The deal, which would have been retroactive to September 1, 2016, contained a 10 percent wage increase over five years, just 2 percent a year, less than the rate of inflation. It would also impose health insurance copays on faculty for the first time.

Generals claimed that the union demands would increase college costs by \$82.8 million, while CCP was offering \$73.5 million. "It's hurting our bottom line,"

he noted arrogantly. "It's not sustainable." He went on to pit students against their teachers, warning that the outcome of negotiations "will affect how much more tuition" they will pay, not only in the next academic year but also for "years to come."

"We don't work here to get rich, but we simply can't afford to go backwards," said English professor Marissa Johnson-Valenzuela in an interview with KYW radio. "We believe in education equality. This contract proposal will take us further away from that. Our students have already dealt with overworked teachers and underpaid teachers and we don't want that," she added.

Full-time faculty members are particularly opposed to the demands by CCP that they teach five courses a semester, up from four. They fear the administration's ultimate aim is to lay off part-time faculty.

Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, former CCP professor Natalie explained, "The high workload is the main issue. The instructors are required to work 12 contract hours every semester, and they want to increase that—every hour matters. On top of the 12 hours, you have office hours. More hours mean diminished ability to develop as a teacher and diminished ability to communicate with your students."

She referred to the conditions in Philadelphia, the poorest large city in the US, "Our students are not very well equipped when they come to community college, they need much more attention than those going to a rich college, like the University of Pennsylvania. We are dealing with working-class and poor families, and that requires more attention to teaching."

"A high workload puts a lot of stress on us, especially because we are trying to help each and every student," Natalie emphasized. Philadelphia has a poverty rate of 26 percent (defined for a single adult under 65 as an

annual income below \$12,752) as well as the lowest college attainment rate among the 15 largest US cities.

Conditions for youth seeking higher education in the state of Pennsylvania have been hammered during the post-recession decade, 2008-2018. Overall state higher education per-student funding has been cut by more than 37.3 percent, the third most severe cut in the nation, according to the Center for Budget on Policy Priorities. The massive state cuts to public schools have translated into higher fees and student loan debt. The annual direct cost to attend CCP is now estimated to be \$17,532, with tuition around \$5,500, higher than all community colleges in the region.

Natalie further described the hardships faced by growing numbers of faculty, “As for the adjuncts, they are just plain outside the system. They come, teach and leave. They don’t even have an office, which makes it very hard to communicate with the students. At one time the union said, in words, that they wanted to fight for equal pay for the adjuncts and full-time faculty, but they dropped that slogan.”

Throughout this period, the AFT has steadily collected dues money from its membership while allowing poverty wages and poor learning conditions to worsen. The last strike at the school was more than a decade ago—in 2007.

The faculty at CCP has now worked for two years without a contract and, as they face strike action, they do so in isolation. The University of Illinois-Chicago graduate and teaching assistants’ strike, now in its third week, likewise faces the danger of betrayal. They too were forced to work without a contract by their AFT-affiliated union, the Graduate Employees Organization, in their case since the beginning of the academic year.

The unions have, moreover, deliberately segregated higher education faculty struggles from K-12 teachers and from each other across the country. After a 20-day strike, faculty at Wright State were forced back to work with major concessions on healthcare and a de facto pay cut last February. The strike by 2,700 graduate workers at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign last year was called off for a paltry wage increase, abandoning the central demand for guaranteed tuition waivers. None of the recent struggles of faculty or graduate teaching assistants have registered real gains.

CCP faculty must beware: AFT President Randi

Weingarten arrived in Philadelphia last Friday to force through a rotten deal. The policy of the AFT and NEA is to crush every walkout and prevent the escalation of struggles in the interests of their lucrative partnership with the Democratic Party.

Asked about the fight for independent rank-and-file committees of teachers to unify the struggle nationally and internationally in defense of public education, Natalie agreed, “I think change has to come from the rank-and-file. The unions have become the problem, not the solution. They are not progressive anymore. I was born in the Soviet Union, and I had a good education. Dialectical thinking became ingrained in my brain—I think the unions have turned into their opposite. They were progressive at one point, but they already had deep problems even then with the union bureaucracy.”

The growing resurgence of the class struggle, not least of all among teachers—from Los Angeles and Oakland to Algeria and Morocco—has already created the impetus for working-class unity in defense of wages, healthcare and the defense of public education.

We urge all faculty, teachers and students to contact the ***World Socialist Web Site*** **Teacher Newsletter** and join in the creation of new, independent rank-and-file organizations of struggle.



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