

University of Illinois-Chicago faculty to vote on strike action as grad student walkout enters third week

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As the walkout by University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) graduate and teaching assistants entered its third week Tuesday, UIC tenured and non-tenured faculty announced they would be voting between April 8 and April 10 to authorize strike action.

The vote was called by the UIC United Faculty Local 6456 (UICUF), an affiliate of the Illinois Federation of Teachers and its parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). Over 1,100 full-time faculty have been working without a contract since August 2018. The UICUF and UIC administrators first began negotiations in June 2018 and last met on March 28, which was over seen by a federal mediator for the first time.

The nearly 1,600 striking graduate students belong to the Graduate Employees Organization Local 6297 (GEO), which is also an affiliate of the AFT. The union has been in negotiations with UIC since March 2018 but only called the strike on March 19, 2019, six months after the previous contract expired.

UIC faculty are demanding increased wages, secured agreements over health and retirement benefits, an agreement from UIC to hire new tenure-track faculty, along with improved agreements over dismissals, disciplinary issues and academic freedom violations.

According to UICUF's president, Janet Smith, a professor at UIC's College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs, multiple UIC faculty over the years have left tenured teaching positions for non-tenured positions elsewhere because of low pay. Others, having worked for a decade at UIC, have still not received tenure.

According to Indeed.com, a UIC instructor makes an average of \$47,656 per year, an assistant professor

averages \$71,532 per year, and an associate professor makes a typical yearly wage of \$86,271. While many faculty members face difficult challenges because of the high cost of living in the Chicago area, the wages paid to grad students leave many in near destitution. The current minimum salary for graduate workers, who work closely with instructors, working 20 hours per week for the nine-month school year, is just \$18,065.

Under the auspices of UIC's chancellor Michael Dimitrios Amiridis, who receives an annual salary of \$475,000 and has received yearly bonuses over \$100,000, UIC's bargaining teams have demanded concessions from both unions, asking them to lower their demands for wage increases. The negotiations are taking place when UIC is implementing a \$1 billion campaign to renovate its campus in Chicago.

Both the GEO and UICUF have offered concessions. The GEO, whose members consist of some of the most exploited workers in education, has provided UIC multiple offers with step downs to their wage demands. The GEO originally asked for a 10 percent increase on the current minimum wage for graduate workers each year for the next three years, reaching \$24,000 by 2021.

For their part, the UICUF has already signed minor tentative agreements with UIC over non-monetary issues like providing office space for faculty. However, there has been no agreement over wages. UICUF though has stepped down on their demands for wages, agreeing to a decrease of UIC's merit pay, which faculty qualify for after 30 days, to 1 percent of their salary from its current 2.

There is wide support for a common struggle. When a striking UIC mathematics graduate student was asked by a WSWS reporter what he thought about uniting

both faculty and graduate students in a common strike, he responded “I’m down!”

He spoke of the conditions facing him and his fellow graduate workers which moved him to strike, “At least in math, we’re like five to ten thousand less than other Research 1 universities. And it’s not only that we’re making less money, but it’s in Chicago where the cost of living is sky high. We also get destroyed by fees. Half or more of our paycheck from the first weeks of the semester goes to fees. We pay about 11 percent of our paycheck. It’s lean, I’ve been eating eggs. I’ve gotten really good at eating eggs. It’s rough. I have a family and it’s been really hard to get by. I basically can’t.” He added, “What winds up happening is, if I can get extras hours I’ll take them, but then that means that I have an increased course load and my studies suffer.”

A combined strike by UIC faculty and graduate workers would cause a deep crisis for the UIC administration and the state and local Democrats who stand behind them. UIC workers are not only fighting the chancellor, but Governor J.B. Pritzker and the Democrats who are carrying out a nationwide assault on public and higher education, just as viciously as Trump, DeVos and the Republicans. The billionaire governor, who was recently proclaimed by GEO’s co-presidents as a “champion of workers’ rights” in a letter to him, oversees the University of Illinois Board of Trustees and has appointed several members of the management board, made up largely by corporate figures and investment bankers.

The AFT is terrified of losing control. They fear faculty, graduate students and students uniting together in the forms of mass walkouts and strikes against the UIC administration, which would ultimately pit them against the Illinois state government, which oversees UIC’s operations, and is controlled by the Democratic Party of Illinois.

For their part, UICUF leaders have made it clear on their website that “a strike authorization vote is the first step toward being able to strike, but it does not guarantee a strike will happen. The bargaining team, after being authorized, decides whether or not to call a strike based on what is happening at the table.”

The AFT is putting as much pressure as possible to prevent the faculty from joining the strike and to keep the grad students isolated until they can be starved into

submission. UICUF President Janet Smith was a delegate to the AFT’s national convention held in Pittsburgh in July of 2018 and no doubt she, along with other UICUF, is in close contact with the AFT.

This past year has shown that the AFT and the rival National Education Association (NEA) are the biggest obstacles to mobilizing educators and broader sections of workers against the bipartisan assault on public education. In strikes involving nearly half a million educators, starting in West Virginia in early 2018 and most recently in the sellout of the Los Angeles, Denver and Oakland strikes, the unions have isolated each section of educators and signed deals that betrayed teachers’ demands and fully accepted the austerity demands of the Democratic Party.

However, the opposition of educators in the US and around the world is continuing. Last week, after nearly three years of failed negotiations, and two years of working without a new contract, 1,200 faculty members at the Community College of Philadelphia authorized strike action.

That is why UIC grad students and faculty must take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the unions by organizing rank-and-file strike committees, which will fight for the demands that educators and their families need, not what the big business politicians and union officials claim is affordable. These committees must fight for a strike throughout all University of Illinois campuses, mobilizing the support of students by fighting for free tuition and the elimination of student loan debt, and mobilizing the entire working class to oppose both corporate-controlled parties and their program of endless austerity and social inequality.



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