

Rutgers University faculty union blocks strike by professors and teaching assistants

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Last week Rutgers University's faculty union announced it had reached a tentative agreement with administrators and was calling off an impending strike by over 3,000 professors and teaching assistants at the university's three campuses in the state of New Jersey. The American Association of University Professors-American Federation of Teachers (AAUP-AFT) called off the walkout after nearly three weeks of self-described "strike preparation" by the union, which followed an overwhelming strike authorization vote by union members.

Voting began April 24, the same day the full agreement was released, and will run through May 3. The AAUP's scuttling of a strike, which would have been the first in the university's 252-year history, blocked the faculty from joining the ongoing, international struggle of educators against austerity and other attacks on public education.

AAUP President Deepa Kumar claimed the union had won "historic gains" for the full-time and grad student faculty. The deal covers all 2,100 full-time professors and 906 graduate student teaching assistants.

The deal reportedly includes securing equal pay for full-time professors with the same experience across the university, bridging a 10-20 percent wage difference between campuses, and giving non-tenure-track faculty access to permanent residency. It also includes a new program that will allegedly allow women and minority professors to appeal for slightly higher wages in order to bridge a reported but not uniform or consistent wage gap of 2-3 percent with white, male counter-parts.

Outside of the scope of the contract, University President Robert Barchi also agreed to spend \$41 million for a "Faculty Diversity Hiring Initiative." The wage gap and minority hiring measures, which will cost the university little or nothing, were presented by union officials as "social justice" demands that were at the heart

of the supposed historic victory. There have been recent reports that the \$41 million to pay for the hiring initiative might come from tuition increases on students.

Wages increases for highly exploited grad students barely exceed projected inflation rates. Grad students will receive a 10 percent raise over the next four years, increasing their minimum wages from less than \$27,000 to around \$30,000. Full-time faculty receive a one-time retroactive increase of \$3,642, followed by inflation-rate raises in the remaining years, some one of which are based on so-called merit standards.

These raises will largely be eaten up by the approximately 7.2 percent inflation rate over the same period and are on par with the average of 3 percent annual raises in five other faculty contracts signed since December 2018. They will still be only slightly higher than what is estimated to be the bare minimum of "livable wages" for New Jersey residents, and will be worth less in the expensive college town of New Brunswick, the location of the university's main campus.

The calling off of the strike comes just a few days before the remaining 3,000 adjunct professors, who have been working without a new contract since September, would have begun new rounds of negotiations. Calls on the union's Facebook page to connect their struggle with members of the AAUP-AFT were increasing just as the union cancelled the strike.

An adjunct with 10 years at the Camden campus said that she felt abandoned by the union, and continued, "A member of the URA (professional office staff) who are also without a contract suggested at the Newark rally yesterday that the faculty union should refuse to ratify their newly negotiated contract until the PTL (part-time lecturers) and URA contracts are settled. I agree with her. That's what solidarity looks like!"

Canceling the strike was not a mistake on the part of Kumar or the AFT, but a tactic to disarm educators. The

betrayal of educators by the AFT and isolating struggles wherever possible is the union apparatus' current strike-preventing—or strike-breaking—formula.

Since the rebellion of West Virginia public school teachers in February 2017, which was initiated by rank-and-file teachers against the resistance of the unions, the AFT, the National Education Association (NEA) and their state and local affiliates, have done everything to divide and separate the state-wide and city-wide struggles of educators. During the experience of the betrayal of the teacher strikes in Los Angeles and Oakland, in February and March, the AFT and NEA affiliates worked with Democratic state and local officials to reach a behind-closed-door deals that included deep school cuts and other reactionary measures.

The deal at Rutgers follows the betrayal of the two-week strike by 1,500 graduate students at the University of Illinois-Chicago (UIC) earlier this month. The Graduate Employees Organization, also an AFT affiliate, ratified a contract that leaves grad students earning well below the cost of living in Chicago. The strike was shut down as students were joining the pickets and faculty was scheduled to vote in favor of strike action.

These experiences at two of the nation's top universities demonstrate the political trap of the unions and the necessity of building new organizations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, which are independent of the unions and the Democratic Party. Grad students and faculty need fighting organizations that begin with the needs of university workers and students, not what wealthy administrators and big business politicians claim is affordable.

Over the last several years, unions like the AFT and the United Auto Workers have increasingly sought to recruit members on the universities to bolster their membership rolls, which have declined because of the unions' collusion in the destruction of jobs and living standards of the teachers and workers they falsely claim to represent. The unions have exploited the desire of university workers to unite and fight to improve their conditions. In this, they have been assisted by members of various pseudo-left outfits who have increasingly gained positions in the union apparatus.

Sherry Wolf, a senior organizer with the Rutgers AAUP-AFT union and long-time member of the now-dissolved International Socialist Organization, was the public face of the union throughout contract negotiations. Propping up the union even as it called off a strike weeks before the membership even had a chance to vote on the tentative

agreement, Wolf stated, "We have a reversal of the power dynamic here at Rutgers. We are going to take the wind in the sails of the full-time faculty and grads and pivot everything we have and everything in our power to win a great contract for the part-time lecturers."

New Jersey's Democratic Governor Phil Murphy, a former multi-millionaire executive at Goldman Sachs, thanked "both sides for their willingness to push forward to a resolution and avoid disruption to the end of the semester" and said the deal "shows the importance of measured dialogue and partnership in reaching our shared goals."

Rank-and-file university workers should reject the contract, which fails to address the miserable conditions of grad students. Rank-and-file committees should be elected to advance demands, including the expansion of the faculty in all levels of positions, not on the basis of race or gender but on the basis of the needs of the 50,000 undergraduate students and the faculty themselves. They should demand livable wages for the graduate, adjunct, and lower-level full-time positions. This must be connected with the struggles of other university staff for decent jobs and a political fight by the whole working class for free tuition and the elimination of student loan debt.

The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site Teacher Newsletter* call for teachers, professors and all other staff in schools and universities to organize these fighting committees independently of the AFT and the Democratic Party. This must be combined with the development of a political movement of the working class against austerity and social inequality, which is based on a socialist alternative to the capitalist profit system.



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