

University of Illinois at Chicago faculty announces deal on eve of strike

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University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) faculty should reject the sellout tentative contract announced Monday by the UIC United Faculty union (UICUF), one day before faculty were set to strike. The proposed contract does nothing to address the demands of faculty for improved living standards and teaching conditions nor impede the attack on faculty, teaching assistants and students by the Democratic Party-backed UIC administration.

The blocking of the strike by the UICUF Local 6456 of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) continues the tactic of dividing and isolating educators in the face of a nationwide and bipartisan assault on public and higher education.

1,100 UICUF members have been working without a contract since August 2018. UICUF and UIC administrators first began negotiations in June 2018. The union opposed joint action with 1,500 grad students and teaching assistants who struck at UIC earlier this month. UICUF officials waited for the betrayal of the three-week strike by another AFT affiliate, the Graduate Employees Organization, before holding a strike authorization vote by faculty. On April 11, the union announced an overwhelming strike authorization vote of 93 percent.

Ratification voting of the proposed faculty contract began yesterday and will continue today, next Monday and Tuesday. The UIC administration has billions of dollars in assets and the university has seen a growth in student enrollment, furthering increasing income. While resisting wage demands from teaching staff, UIC is implementing a \$1 billion campaign to renovate its campus in Chicago. UIC's chancellor Michael Dimitrios Amiridis, who has overseen contract negotiations, has an annual salary of \$475,000 and has received yearly bonuses of over \$100,000. Such facts tear apart the lie that there is no money to pay good wages to workers.

The Democrats and Republicans have sought to turn public education into a for-profit industry to fill the overflowing coffers of the ruling elite with even more money. Financial burden is placed on students through increased tuition and

fees, and educators through attacks on pay and benefits. This is sold as "cost-cutting" measures and "efficiencies" by UIC trustees, who are appointed by Illinois' Democratic governor, billionaire J.B. Pritzker.

UICUF released a limited summary of the tentative contract. The proposed contract raises the minimum salary for non-tenured-track faculty to \$50,000, previously \$42,000. In one of the most expensive cities in the United States, such pay leaves individuals, many with families and who have spent years getting their PhDs and master's degrees while accumulating huge sums of student debt, in precarious situations.

The union's proposal for the rest of faculty creates tier-like ranks. Instead of creating a universal starting wage, the current proposal places different tiers of pay for different positions, creating bureaucratic measures to obtaining new positions and higher pay that UIC administrators can deny.

Specifically, the proposed base pay for lecturers, instructors, clinical and research assistant professors is \$50,000. For senior instructors, senior lecturers, clinical and research associate professors, it is \$55,000. Clinical and research professors will get \$60,500. For tenure-track assistant professors, the proposed based pay is \$65,000. Lastly, the proposed base pay for tenured associate professors is \$71,500 and \$78,650 for tenured full professors.

The contract does not guarantee pay raises but, as in the previous faculty contract and common among colleges and universities across the United States, determines pay raises primarily through performance and market variability.

The union conceded initial proposals of 3.5, 4.5, and 4 percent merit increases distributed over the course of the three-year contract to a flat two percent increase each year, in line with the administration's demand. In the end, the union agreed to a total four percent raise pool per academic department for the duration of the three-year contract. Two percent will go toward compression and equity raises while the other two percent is for raises based on merit and annual reviews.

Compression and equity raises are determined through comparing an individual's salary with peers at their university or college and the general labor market specific to that field. These are variable and change each year. There is no guarantee raise.

Merit pay increases are subject to review based on "shared governance," a vague description, which implies both the administration and the union have some kind of role in mandating merit pay. In the end, merit is not guaranteed pay and is often etched out to what the university deems as its most productive professors, those churning out books, academic papers, speaking at conferences and so on.

Non-tenured teachers are the most vulnerable within faculty and constitute the majority. According to collegefactual.com, a majority of UIC faculty, 1,189, is non-tenured while tenured-track faculty add up to 890.

In addition to being the lowest paid, many non-tenured faculty are given annual contracts, leaving them without long-term job security. The proposed contract does little to address this. It proposes non-tenured faculty be appointed two-year contracts after working four years and three-year contracts after working six.

This deal follows a year of the growth of the class struggle in the form of a strike wave of teachers in the United States beginning in West Virginia in February 2018 to Oklahoma, Kentucky, California and more. In Poland, hundreds of thousands of teachers are engaged in a nationwide strike to protest austerity measures.

Last week, the Rutgers University's faculty union, also an AFT affiliate, reached an agreement with Rutgers administrators and called off an impending strike by over 3,000 professors and teaching assistants. The contract does nothing to address the basic demands of better pay and leaves workers with raises to be eaten away by inflation.

Earlier this month, the Graduate Employees Organization, again an AFT affiliate, betrayed the strike by 1,500 UIC graduate students, with whom many faculty work. The GEO ratified a contract that leaves grad students earning poverty-level wages well below what is considered a basic cost of living in Chicago.

The UIC graduate student strike found massive support by students and teachers at UIC and across the city and was shut down as UIC students were joining the pickets and planning a walkout. However, both the UICUF and GEO, enmeshed in a growing upheaval by students and faculty, consciously kept both struggles isolated.

These experiences demonstrate how the AFT and its affiliated unions, which are critical components of the Democratic Party, impose the austerity demands of the corporate and financial aristocracy. In a period of radicalization and growing hatred of capitalism, the unions

are desperately trying to block or isolate every outbreak of walkout, strike and upheaval.

The growth of the class struggle is striking fear in the Democratic Party, which has overseen ruthless attacks on public education, including the closure of 50 public schools by Mayor Rahm Emanuel, President Obama's former chief of staff. While poverty continues to grow across Chicago's deindustrialized south and west sides, 17 billionaires lord over the city.

The relationship between the AFT and its affiliates to the Democratic Party is made clear by two members. AFT's president Randi Weingarten, who makes over \$500,000 a year, is a member of the Democratic National Committee. UICUF's president, professor Janet Smith, a delegate to the AFT's national convention held in Pittsburgh in July of 2018, will sit on Chicago Mayor-elect Lori Lightfoot's transition committee. The career of the mayor-elect has been one of protecting killer cops in Chicago and covering up the crimes of the Chicago Police Department.

The AFT sought to isolate the GEO and UICUF struggles out of fear that a unified fight would have provoked a crisis for the UIC administration along with the state and local Democrats who stand behind them. But that is exactly what is needed. UIC faculty should reject the sellout deal and turn to the broadest layers of workers, including autoworkers, logistical workers and Chicago Public Schools teachers facing a contract at the end of the school year, to wage a common fight to defend the right to high quality and free public and higher education.

The Socialist Equality Party and the World Socialist Web Site Teacher Newsletter call for teaching assistants, teachers, professors and all other staff in schools and universities to build rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions and opposed to both corporate-controlled parties. This struggle must be rooted in a new political perspective based on the struggle for a socialist alternative to the austerity and social inequality spawned by the capitalist profit system.



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