

Chicago-area college advertises for strikebreakers as faculty walkout looms

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Over 300 teachers and faculty at the College of DuPage (COD) voted on Thursday “overwhelmingly” to approve strike procedures against a Chicago-area community college which serves 26,000 students. The vote, preliminary to an actual strike ballot, was held against the backdrop of a clear threat by the administration to operate with scab labor.

The contract between the COD and the faculty union, College of DuPage Faculty Association (CODFA), expired on August 14th. Teachers were sent back to work for the new school year without a contract, despite fruitless negotiations since last March. In a highly provocative step, the school posted on its website an advertisement for 143 positions to “fill in,” obviously in the event of a strike.

In advance of the contract expiration, the school first sought to mobilize the notoriously underpaid adjunct faculty as strikebreakers. It presented the 700-member College of DuPage Adjunct Association (CODAA) with a “strike contingency plan,” promising any adjunct teachers willing to take over the classes of striking faculty increased wages and benefits, such as health insurance and paid vacation—benefits they have been denied since 1985. Throughout the US, adjunct teachers work for poverty wages, have little job security and are usually contracted on a per term basis. The CODAA membership, however, voted by a very large margin to reject the slimy offer.

On Tuesday both sides met with a federal mediator. “A strike is the last thing that we want, and we will do everything in our power to avoid that,” said Shannon Toler, president of the College of DuPage Faculty Association (CODFA). She said she was “encouraged by the improved dialogue” and added that the union will continue to bargain with the board of trustees.

The talks are focused on wages. Starting salaries have

been frozen for three years and, according to the union, nearly half of all of their members have received no salary increases.

The College of DuPage is a two-year community college that offers Associate’s degrees as well as technical certificates. It has the second largest student body in the state of Illinois and serves a large working-class population. It is located just 20 miles west of Chicago where 25,000 teachers are being forced to begin the school year without a contract. The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), headed by President Jesse Sharkey, a member of the now-defunct International Socialist Organization, has put off a possible strike until late September.

Last Thursday, hundreds of faculty were joined by various union officials, rallying before the Board of Trustees meeting. While adept at dressing in red and offering cheery words, none of the various union officials—most especially the CTU—offered to mobilize their membership and spread the walkout in the interest of spearheading a fight to defend public education. It is already clear that the COD faculty, should they walk out, will be isolated by the Illinois Education Association (IEA) and National Education Association (NEA), a pattern which has occurred at every faculty/graduate student strike across the US from University of Illinois-Springfield to Wright State University to Columbia University.

In fact, both the CODFA and CODAA contracts have no-strike clauses and different expiration dates. Despite the vote to reject the strikebreaking *en masse*, adjunct teachers have been put in the position of having to either cross the picket line or illegally strike. CODAA President Baunbach-Caplan has already promised the administration that the adjuncts will not join in sympathy strikes and will cross the picket line to

“honor assignments they agreed to for the fall semester.”

The current contract at DuPage was signed in 2012 and has been renewed twice. The 2017 agreement included a pay freeze that translates into a significant pay cut when considering inflation. Over the last 7 years teachers have received below inflation raises of less than 1 per cent per year. It is speculated that inasmuch as DuPage educators are still more highly paid than many of their peers, the administration has garnered state and local political support in their efforts to take on the teachers.

The exact proposals submitted to the federal mediator have not been released, but some detail has been reported in the local press. According to those accounts, the faculty association is seeking a paltry pay increase, while the administration is demanding more supervision of faculty and new restrictive criteria for promotions. Currently the school has \$187 million in cash reserves and President Brian Caputo, who began his 3-year contract in July 2019, is receiving a starting salary of \$262,500, five times the salary of a starting full time teacher.

In 2015, the college was put on probation and almost lost accreditation due to financial mismanagement and ethics violations. The Higher Learning Commission cited the school for regular breaches of its investment policies which added to costly losses; awarding exclusive contracts to vendors on the college’s foundation board; and a lack of ethics training for employees. Former COD President, Robert Breuder, was earning over \$400,000 per year. After being fired, he received a \$700,000 severance payment. This resulted in a state and federal criminal investigation.

Most fundamentally, however, the attack on DuPage faculty is part of the overall slashing of funds for public education, both in Illinois and nationally. Under the Obama administration nearly \$9 billion was cut from overall funding of public two- and four-year colleges. In Illinois, Democratic and Republican administrations alike have systematically starved higher education, going all the way back to 2000. In 2019, Illinois spends 25 percent less than it did 17 years ago. Between 2015 and 2017, colleges and universities were cut by a staggering \$1.2 billion.

In discussions on next year’s state budget, the chairman of the House Higher Education Committee

Democrat Carol Ammons, D-Urbana, claimed last March, “Obviously, the state has very, very little money—if we would call it money—to increase anything at this point,” indicating that even Democratic Governor J.B. Pritzker’s drop-in-the-bucket offer of 5 percent was highly unlikely. The Pritzkers, one of the wealthiest families in the US, worth more than \$30 billion, could easily provide billions for the state’s higher education system and barely notice the drop in their net worth.



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