

President of Wayne State University calls cops on lecturers protesting layoffs

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Opposition is mounting after 38 percent of lecturers received “notices of non-renewal” last month in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Detroit’s Wayne State University.

Last Wednesday, dozens of protesters rallied at the university and attempted to present a Statement of Support for the Lecturers, circulated by Local 6075 of the American Federation of Teachers and signed by at least 800 people from WSU and other universities, to the University President M. Roy Wilson. However, Wilson refused to accept the petition in person, and campus police were deployed to prevent them from entering the president’s office. The incident was caught on video posted to the local union’s Youtube page.

Two days later, Wilson responded with a patronizing email to lecturers which declared that “the work that you and your fellow lecturers do helps us greatly in fulfilling that mission [of scholarship and learning]” but that issuing the layoff notices would allow the university to not keep “certain lecturers on the payroll unnecessarily in the case that the budget cannot support them,” i.e. to fire them selectively.

Many of the laid-off lecturers, according to the petition, have won award for their work, including “the WSU President’s Award for Excellence in Teaching, the CLAS Teaching Award, the Murray Jackson Award for Creative Work, and the Kresge Foundation’s Artist Award.” Together, these award winning faculty members have more than 103 years of combined experience teaching at the university.

At around the same time that the layoffs were announced, the university administration also fired several staffers at Wayne State University Press. However, it was forced to rehire most of them after protests.

Wayne State University has been subject to ongoing

funding crises, which the board of directors has sought to fill through tuition hikes, greater utilization of adjunct faculty, and other regressive measures. When adjusted for inflation, state funding for public universities in the state of Michigan has decreased 12 percent since 2010, according to *Bridge Magazine*.

Lecturers comprise 12 percent of Wayne State faculty and teach up to 20 percent of its nearly 27,000 students. The non-tenured lecturers are paid half the salary of a tenured professor, an average of \$62,000 compared to \$120,000. The university is planning to implement unspecified budget cuts of \$1.8 million, and is using the threat of lecturer layoffs to wrest further concessions, according to the petition.

“I think it’s ridiculous given how hard these lecturers work,” one Wayne State student told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “They have office hours for students, they put together our curricula, they teach us and they’re not given the respect they deserve. They probably have student loans they’re paying off but they have these low wages and now, on top of that, they have no job security in their careers? It’s ridiculous.

“I think the treatment of the lecturers is a reflection of the society that we live in. The work of academics and scientists is not valued,” she added. “When you look at something like the Coronavirus, you need scientists to research that.”

On the deployment of campus police against demonstrates, she responded, “we pay all those tuition dollars and for what? To not even have a voice, really.”

Although many of the fired lecturers are on the teaching schedule for the Fall of 2020, they will not know for several months if their contracts will be renewed, leaving their lives in total uncertainty since academic jobs for next year have already been posted and filled.

As public funding for education has collapsed, the use of low-paid temporary or adjunct faculty has increased exponentially. In 2015, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) estimated that 75 percent of professors are not tenure track. NPR estimated in 2013 that the average annual pay of adjunct faculty is at the starvation level of \$20,000 to \$25,000 annually.

The proletarianization of large swaths of university faculty has led to an explosive and restive atmosphere. Graduate students at Harvard struck last year, and grad students at Columbia are scheduled to vote to authorize strike action this week.

Graduate students at the University of California-Santa Cruz (UCSC) have carried out a wildcat strike since January, in defiance of the United Auto Workers union, to demand cost of living adjustments to help pay their bills in one of the country's most expensive cities. The courageous stand has met with widespread support internationally, and has sparked similar job actions by graduate students on other campuses.

Last week, UC president Janet Napolitano, the former Homeland Security secretary under Obama, made good on her threats to fire all striking graduate students. This provocative escalation has sparked a wave of opposition, and there have been calls on social media to shut down all 11 campuses in the University of California system.

Napolitano, who justified the firings by citing the no-strike clause in the UAW's contract, has relied upon the unions to isolate and betray their strike. The UAW has filed a grievance only on the basis that the administration proposed to negotiate with groups other than the UAW. A UAW official at UC Berkeley flatly rejected demands for their campus to join the strike in the event that UCSC grad students were fired.

At Wayne State, the AFT is playing the same role as the UAW in California, by directing lecturers to fruitless appeals to the university administration, which has already demonstrated through its use of police that it is impervious to such appeals.

Both in Detroit and nationwide, the AFT has compiled a record of betrayals no less lengthy than the UAW. From Detroit to West Virginia Oklahoma, Arizona, Chicago, Los Angeles, Oakland and countless other places where teachers have struck in defense of public education, the AFT has forced through betrayals

which have laid the groundwork for further cuts. AFT President Randi Weingarten, who draws an annual salary of over \$500,000, is a close ally of the Clintons and the most right wing factions in the Democratic Party.

The possibility exists for a powerful struggle uniting lecturers with graduate students and broad sections of the working class nationwide. In particular, Detroit public school teachers, whose contract expires on June 30th, and who conducted sickouts in 2016 to call attention to the third-world conditions in the city's schools, would respond to appeals from the lecturers with enthusiasm.

But such a struggle can only be waged independent of, and in opposition to, the AFT. Instead, lecturers must form rank-and-file committees to take the initiative out of the hands of the union and link up with striking UCSC students, Detroit teachers, autoworkers and other sections of the working class.



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