

Ohio University lays off 140 workers amid massive statewide cuts to higher education

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On Friday May 1, Ohio University (OU) administration announced the official layoff of 140 custodial staff, maintenance workers and groundskeepers. The staff were all members of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employee (AFSCME) union, Local 1699. It is estimated that the cuts will save the university roughly \$11 million.

In the same week, three faculty members were told that their contracts would not be renewed in the fall. While only three non-renewals have been officially announced, a student Twitter protest group #SaveOURProfs has reported that eight professors have informed the group of receiving non-renewals.

In addition to the eliminated positions, OU has announced that roughly 32 full-time positions vacated before the pandemic through the university's cost-cutting Early Retirement Incentive Program (ERIP) will not be filled.

Students and professors have taken to Twitter to express their outrage with the layoffs, referring to the announcement as the "May Day Massacre."

As for the union, the AFSCME local has done virtually nothing to protect the workers or organize any serious resistance to the moves. Five days after the layoffs, the Local 1699 union officials, in conjunction with the Association of American University Professors (AAUP), were compelled to call a largely inconsequential one-day motorcade rally. AFSCME has not set dates for any follow-up demonstrations.

The laid-off AFSCME workers were working under an extended contract after their contract expired on March 1, 2020. Ohio University's board of trustees rejected a proposed agreement which was brought to the table on Monday.

The layoffs came several days after the university

president, M Duane Nellis, sent an email to the OU community detailing the financial impact of COVID-19 and the need to implement severe cost-cutting measures. In a cynical attempt to show their solidarity with workers, Nellis also announced that he and Provost Sayrs would reduce their base pay by 15% in the 2021 fiscal year, for a combined savings of roughly \$130,000.

Many of the new, drastic cuts are in response to Ohio Governor Mike DeWine's \$775 million state budget cut which will go into effect in the remaining two months of the 2020 fiscal year. The cuts will reduce higher education funding by \$110 million. In addition, a staggering three hundred million will be cut from K-12 education.

The state's public universities have been told to expect 20 percent reductions in shares of state funding this fiscal year and the next. For Ohio University, these reductions will equal an \$8 million dollar loss in the 2020 fiscal year. Under this same reduction, Ohio State University will see cuts of \$14.9 million and Columbus State will see cuts of \$2.7 million.

While COVID-19 forces a sudden and devastating stress to university budgets, higher education budgets across the nation as well as in Ohio have suffered a slow decline in funding for several decades. This process was vastly exacerbated by the 2008 recession.

Before the pandemic, Ohio University ran a \$35 million deficit in the 2020 fiscal year, and in December 2019, the university implemented a hiring freeze and the "Voluntary Separation Agreement and Early Retirement Incentive Program" to push faculty and staff off the payrolls.

Akron University, operating under a \$65 million pre-COVID deficit, also made significant cuts. In addition to an existing hiring freeze and pay cuts, the university

announced last month that it would be shuttering six out of its eleven academic campuses.

In an April 28 statement, the president of Dayton University, Eric Spina, outlined plans to furlough or lay off 500 employees at the start of the upcoming summer break. Miami University, located outside of Cincinnati, is currently in the process of informing a majority of contingent faculty—visiting professors, adjunct professors, visiting lecturers—that their contracts will not be renewed for the next academic year.

Kent State also implemented an early retirement program and hiring freeze, and lists percentage breakdowns of salary cuts based on income on its website while also warning of impending job losses, stating, “Implementing a 20% budget cut will require layoffs and job abolishments.”

Trends in Ohio higher education budgets are in line with national statistics. According to data from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, state spending on higher education fell precipitously following the 2008 recession with some of the worst hit states, such as Alabama, Arizona, Louisiana, Pennsylvania and South Carolina, slashing their higher education funding by more than 35 percent.

Decades-long cutbacks in state and federal funding for higher education have been used to justify massive increases in tuition while wages remain stagnant, a divergence that has left students and their families buried under student loans. This process was greatly intensified following the 2008 crash, with student loan debt rising from \$660 billion in September 2008 to \$1.6 trillion today.

Workers who are fortunate enough to maintain their jobs are now facing deadly back-to-work orders as the mainstream media blares a fabricated message that the world faces a choice between the sacrifice of workers’ lives and global economic ruin.



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