

University of Michigan Flint cuts 41 percent of lecturers

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Nearly 41 percent of lecturers at the University of Michigan Flint have been laid off since the university reported an \$8.4 million budget shortfall.

Jennifer Hogan, a university spokeswoman, recently left a comment for a local NBC affiliate, stating, “The pandemic has now exacerbated the situation and the university is preparing for a fiscal year 2020/2021 shortfall... requiring significant budget cuts.” The university has also suffered a steady decline in enrollment, which has increased the financial pressure on it.

Hogan explained that the cuts include salary reductions, voluntary furloughs impacting 16 percent of staff, reorganization of administration departments and layoffs of administrative staff, cancellation of certain contracts and projects, and a spending and hiring freeze. Thirteen percent of the staff cuts are full layoffs and 7 percent are non-reappointments.

The cutting of lecturers at U-M Flint by almost 41 percent will have severe consequences for the university. Laura MacIntyre, a lecturer in the sociology department and resident of Flint, stated, “We were already in a precarious position. The horrible conditions that already exist are being exacerbated.”

MacIntyre continued, “Even with a union, we have sh*tty working conditions. We’re supposed to have one of the best contracts in the country, so what does this mean for other lecturers in other parts of the United States?”

MacIntyre is considered partially laid off. Her contract is 50 percent, which means she has a 50/50 chance of employment.

“I was not offered any classes for the spring or summer semester, and I have a feeling that my fall classes will be canceled,” she said. Explaining the use of the term “lecturer” at U-M Flint, she continued: “In

another system we would be called ‘adjuncts.’ The lecturer designation is 1984 double-speak.”

When asked about her income from teaching at the university, MacIntyre said, “It’s very hard to know what my income will be because of the cancellation policy, which was there before the pandemic. Last year I made \$18,000, and that included the \$10,000 increase the union got us. I actually qualify for food stamps and Medicaid, so with this job, I’m living in poverty.”

MacIntyre also discussed the compounding effect of the water crisis in Flint: “I’m one of the many still suffering from the Flint water crisis. I’ve developed rheumatoid arthritis along with other health issues that have become prevalent among residents here.”

The University of Michigan administration and regents recently voted to increase tuition across its campuses. For students at Flint, this will make the university even less accessible. Commenting on this issue, MacIntyre told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “I think higher education is over for the working class—for anyone who is not elite and going to Harvard, Princeton or Yale. It’s a debt system for the rest of us.”

She continued, “Our students are taught by workers who are in such precarious positions, and then we’re expected to perform a miracle.”

MacIntyre also raised the issue of teaching in an online format beginning in the winter semester earlier this year: “When COVID-19 happened, we were expected without any prep or compensation to transfer our entire class online. To revamp a class mid-semester is not fair to the professor and certainly not to the students.” She noted that students were not given any reimbursement or compensation when the classes switched to online.

MacIntyre was one of many lecturers asked to take an intensive online development course over the summer,

with no pay, in order to teach online courses. “My department demanded that I take it so I could teach online. We were coerced to work an additional 10–13 hours each week with no pay for seven weeks.”

Dr. Kenneth Litwin, an associate professor in criminal justice at U-M Flint, raised issues related to accessibility to higher education and the burden of student debt. “State funding of universities is declining,” he said. “That puts more pressure on universities to fill the money that was coming in with increased tuition, which makes it more difficult to access.

“When I hear my students talk about the kind of student loans they have, it breaks my heart. I don’t want them to be punished for the rest of their life because they are not wealthy enough to pay for it up front. I look up and I see future suffering in their faces.”

In connection with the socio-economic position of Flint students, Litwin explained that many of his students are “nontraditional” and have more work or family responsibilities than students at U-M Ann Arbor, which has a more middle class and upper-middle class student body. Litwin also noted that some students are dealing with the long-term health consequences of the lead poisoning of Flint’s water supply.

He condemned what he described as not only an institutional problem, but a system that produces and deepens inequality. “It’s just heartbreaking to know there are these additional burdens placed on very intelligent, very passionate, very capable people who can do so much in this world, but are just so burden-laden because they don’t have the economic privilege to not be put in that position.”

He described higher education as “accessible” but with shackles,” and made the comment, “Student loans are just a way to punish people who aren’t rich enough to pay for college themselves.”

Litwin also raised the One University or “1U” campaign that was launched by students and faculty across U-M’s three campuses to create more parity between each campus. “The U-M name is on all campuses, and the university has financial resources that are available to use. They can choose to distribute those resources.”

There is a significant disparity in funding between the

campuses, with U-M Ann Arbor receiving about 200 percent the amount of state funding per student that goes to the Dearborn or Flint campuses. However, at a time when higher education is deprived of funding across the country, the solution to the funding crisis must go far beyond the call for redistributing existing resources within a single university system.

Across U-M’s three campuses there will be an estimated \$400 million to \$1 billion in losses by the end of the year. This is in line with a nearly universal trend among colleges and universities, which have been severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The crisis has slashed state revenues. At the same time, revenues have been cut as a result of the suspension of sources of income such as sports, while measures required to control the spread of the virus have increased expenses.

Critical funding issues in higher education existed long before the 2020 pandemic. Budget cuts have been a nationwide phenomenon since the 2008 Wall Street crash and recession. Under both Republicans and Democrats, the US has allocated vast resources to bail out the major banks and corporations, provide tax cuts for the rich, militarize the police and the US-Mexican border, and wage predatory imperialist wars.

Even during the pandemic, when resources are desperately needed to fund health care systems and provide financial assistance to workers, the bipartisan CARES Act has demonstrated that the priority of the ruling class is to protect and increase the wealth of the financial aristocracy, to the tune of trillions of dollars.

The city of Flint is a constant reminder of the agenda of the ruling elite, under Democrats no less than Republicans. Deindustrialization, huge cuts to schools and social programs, and the poisoning of an entire city—such is the recent history of Flint. The city exemplifies the real state of social conditions for the working class under American capitalism.



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