

Faculty at University of Akron reject sellout contract

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On August 5, faculty at the University of Akron voted down a sellout contract that included layoffs of 96 full-time professors, pay cuts and increased health care premiums. The contract was part of a plan passed in July by the university's Board of Trustees to eliminate 178 positions at the northeast Ohio-based public research university.

Out of the 364 members of the Akron chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), 184 voted against ratification of the contract and 159 voted for ratification, a 54–46 margin. In the run-up to the vote the Akron-AAUP Executive Committee and Department Liaison Council recommended a no vote, despite its decision to bring the agreement to a ratification vote.

Following the vote, Akron-AAUP chapter president Pamela Schulze in a statement described the contract as “divisive.” She then called on the members to “work together” to strengthen the union for future negotiations. She also added, “I call on the Administration to return to the negotiating table with us to work out an agreement we can all live with, before or after arbitration.”

Schulze had previously made statements that the rejection of the agreement would likely result in binding arbitration.

The University of Akron President Gary Miller responded to the rejection of the agreement by issuing a statement reiterating his claims that the financial stability of the university requires mass layoffs. He stated, “The vote does not change the financial outlook of the University.”

He further emphasized, “No solutions to our challenges can be accomplished without a significant reduction in force. What the vote does is create uncertainty about what type of reduction in force we

will have and how much of our limited and precious reserves we will have to spend to accomplish it.”

The administration and AAUP have publicly put forward conflicting claims about what the two parties agreed to during their discussions on the contract.

According to statements from the AAUP, the Akron-AAUP and university negotiation teams met in March 2020 and agreed to a tentative agreement that was different than the one approved by the Board of Trustees in July. According to the union, one major difference was that the original contract did not include the layoffs of nearly a hundred professors.

In late May the administration invoked two clauses in the current contract—which is set to expire December 31—which govern “unforeseen, uncontrolled and catastrophic circumstances” and “exigent circumstances.” The administration asserted that they were invoking these clauses due to a \$65 million budgetary shortfall from the COVID-19 pandemic. They specified that these clauses allowed the university to immediately fire faculty regardless of tenure, cut pay, raise health care premiums and eliminate health care benefits for dependents of retirees and furloughs.

After the University of Akron Board of Trustees voted in favor of the tentative agreement, the administration began notifying the professors that were slated to be fired in the event that the contract passed. As a result many faculty that voted on the tentative agreement did so with knowledge that the contract being ratified would immediately result in the loss of their individual jobs.

The university's doctoral program in counseling psychology has been put in jeopardy as professor Margo Gregor, one of only five professors in the program, is among the 96 faculty members slated to be laid off. The American Psychological Association

(APA), which accredits programs at universities, had previously stated that the program's low number of faculty was a "major issue." It is unclear what the long-term impact of losing 20 percent of the program's faculty will have on its accreditation.

Prior to the agreement being voted down, the AAUP also filed two charges of unfair labor practices (ULP) against the university. The ULPs concern the faculty being slated for layoffs. The AAUP has claimed that they never agreed that faculty being fired are required to sign a general release—a legal document that would prevent the former faculty from filing claims against the university—before receiving benefits. The union has stated that they only agreed that laid-off faculty have to sign a release in order to get a \$12,000 severance package. In the end, however, this is a minor technicality which obscures the more important fact that the union agreed to such economic blackmail at all.

The other grievance was filed on behalf of the faculty given layoff notices by the Board of Trustees on July 15 as well as faculty on an earlier list who chose to retire to avoid being fired on July 15. The AAUP claims the faculty slated for layoffs had not been given adequate notice or reason for being selected; that those slated for layoffs had previously filed grievances against the University; that the layoffs had a "disparate impact on older faculty members," those with disabilities, women and minority groups. The grievance also points out that some faculty members were hired at the same time as the layoffs, undercutting the administration's argument that the firing were economically motivated.

Faculty that were selected for layoffs as part of the Board of Trustees' decision will be unemployed after August 22, pending the arbitration ruling.

Despite filing the ULPs, the AAUP throughout the negotiations with the administration has completely accepted that faculty must take concessions in order to resolve the university's budgetary shortfall. The AAUP, however, has raised concerns that the demands of the administration to rapidly lay off faculty has made the contracts impossible to ratify and could damage the university's reputation.

AAUP specified in a statement from July 27 that they warned the University Negotiating Team that the administration's demands included provisions that "would jeopardize ratification." Instead the AAUP

proposed temporary pay cuts in exchange for fewer layoffs this year and the possibility of another "smaller layoff next year." They also claimed that the "pay cuts can serve the University as a bridge to... permanent expenditure reductions," caused by faculty resigning and retiring.

For decades now the various union bureaucracies have played a key role in subverting workers struggles and imposing concessions. Under the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic these same organizations are redoubling their efforts to impose austerity, and in many cases force workers back on the job under unsafe conditions. The Socialist Equality Party and International Youth and Students for Social Equality call on educators and students to break from these bankrupt organizations to organize against deteriorating living conditions.



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