

Wayne State University administration announces pay freezes and layoffs

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Wayne State University (WSU) President Roy Wilson published a statement on the school's website in early August announcing pay freezes and layoffs to its staff in the coming year. The statement spelled out several possible "solutions" to WSU's budgetary crisis being considered by the university's board of directors.

All of the scenarios place the burden of the budget cuts squarely on workers and students. The measures include pay freezes, layoffs, and furloughs to lecturers and other staff members, as well as budget reductions to the university's various academic departments, and a reduction in the retirement contributions which are provided by the university to its tenured staff. These measures constitute an austerity attack on education professionals and on the quality of education provided to the attendees at the university. This comes on top years of tuition hikes for students over the past decade.

WSU is an inner-city college campus whose residents and attendees are mostly young people of a working-class background, many of them commuting to their classes from home.

Several of the austerity measures announced in Wilson's statement on August 4 had been under consideration since before the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in the United States. In other words, the WSU administration is using the crisis to push through long sought after "cost-cutting" attacks on workers and students.

This is most starkly expressed in the situation facing lecturers. In February, 38 percent of lecturers at WSU's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences received "notices of non-renewal." At the time, the notices stipulated that while not all of these lecturers would be definitively laid off, all of them would not be teaching this coming semester. The notices also indicated that their salaries, if they got called back to work before the end of the fiscal year, would see a proportionate or partial reduction from

whatever it was in their contract at the time. In the meantime, the board of directors would give "more consideration" to the question of who should be laid off and who should stay.

As the WSWS stated at the time, "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."

Wilson's announcement on August 4 claims that these measures will be implemented temporarily for the fiscal year 2021. However, no suggestion was made that staff members who will be laid off would ever be reinstated at some point in the future whenever the COVID-19 pandemic would presumably be under control.

A specific figure on how many people will be laid off has yet to be given. Wilson's announcement simply states that "both our preferred budget solution and our contingency budget solution include layoffs, though at very different levels. Ultimately, the degree to which we will need to implement layoffs will be determined by our ability to lower compensation of all employees through pay freezes and furloughs."

The operational definition of "furloughs" in Wilson's announcement is "a percentage reduction in work hours and a corresponding reduction in salary." The details of this plan will be settled in the near future through the "bargaining process," a reference to negotiations that have yet to be finalized between WSU's board of directors and various unions representing the university's staff and lecturers.

The targeted budget reductions for the college campus was considered, analyzed, and developed by the university's Budget Planning Council and the Finance Subcommittee. Both of these bodies consist of designees appointed by Wilson himself, other executives of WSU, union bureaucrats, and so-called "university

stakeholders” according to the university’s website, who no doubt include wealthy donors. The class interests which pertain to the members of these bodies who make important decisions affecting workers and students are irreconcilably hostile to the needs of the working class community in metropolitan Detroit.

The preferred budget solution which these bourgeois overlords of the university have in mind includes a salary freeze for all employees including tenured professors, a reduction in the administrative division of the budget by 7 percent, and a reduction in college campus expenditures by 5 percent.

The school’s deans and members of the cabinet have also agreed to take a 5 percent reduction in their salaries, a mostly meaningless gesture made in an attempt to feign solidarity with workers who will be affected by the implementation of this budget solution. Wilson specifically will accept a reduction in his salary of 10 percent, which amounts to \$50,000, leaving him with a still overblown salary of \$450,000, allowing him to continue a luxurious upper-middle-class lifestyle that he already enjoys.

Members of the board of directors of universities generally receive six-figure incomes from their position within the campus hierarchy and have other sources of income which they collect casually, such as the dividends on their stock portfolios. Investors in the US stock market, in particular, have been receiving enormous windfalls during the coronavirus pandemic, which were ensured earlier this spring through the federal government’s injection of trillions of dollars into the stock market with the passage of the grossly misnamed CARES Act.

The real attitude of the ruling elite towards college educators was on display at WSU in late February of this year, when dozens of protesters held a demonstration on campus in support of the lecturers who had received the notices that their contracts would be allowed to expire this year. The demonstrators at that rally gathered outside of the Faculty/Administration Building to present a petition to Wilson, signed by 800 staff members from WSU and other universities, demanding the reinstatement of the targeted lecturers. Wilson refused to accept the petition in person and ordered campus police to prevent the demonstrators from entering his office.

Universities across the country are carrying out similar austerity measures, laying off faculty members and cutting the pay of their employees as they prepare to reopen under the deadly conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. The American Council on Education has

predicted that colleges and universities nationwide will experience a \$23 billion decline in revenue during the upcoming fiscal year, which will have a devastating impact on their budgets.

The University of Wisconsin stands to see a potential collapse in its revenue of \$100 million, which will surely lead to a steep drop in its \$650 million budget. Missouri Western University announced earlier this summer that it is laying off 25 percent. The University of Hawaii is preparing for a decline in its operational budget for the upcoming year of up to \$181 million. Their current budget is \$1 billion. Kalbert Young, the official in charge of developing the school’s budget solutions, told the university’s board of regents in a meeting, “There will be prolonged, possibly perpetual changes to how this university is run.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the vast social crisis facing the working class, which is rooted in class antagonisms that are inherent to the global capitalist mode of production. Part of this social crisis involves the placing of high-quality and higher education increasingly out of reach for the working class, burdening students with loans that might take their entire life to pay off, and attacking the living standards of educators and education workers.

All of this demonstrates the urgent need for the independent mobilization of the working class to defend its right to a high-quality education, ensure the social well-being of educators and education workers, and demand the full funding of institutions of higher learning. These objective social needs need to be secured alongside the safety of students and college staff from the deadly illness caused by the novel coronavirus.

The Socialist Equality Party is organizing a fight back against the reckless reopening of schools. All educators, school workers, parents, and students who support this initiative should join our Facebook page and contact us today to find out how to join our fight.

We will be hosting a **national call-in meeting** at 3:00 p.m. EDT (12:00 p.m. PDT) on Saturday, August 22, to discuss developments and the way forward. We urge you to make plans today to attend this vital meeting.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact