

Faculty strike looms at Youngstown State University after trustees reject fact-finding report

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After ten months of failed negotiations between Youngstown State University (YSU) administrators and the union representing YSU faculty, the Ohio Education Association (YSU-OEA), the YSU faculty is preparing to strike.

On Monday, YSU Board of Trustees rejected a fact-finding report that the union had approved the week prior. The report was drafted by Betty Widgeon, a retired Michigan District Court judge and founder of Widgeon Dispute Resolution, in an effort to resolve an ongoing labor dispute between the YSU-OEA and the administration. YSU-OEA members voted 312 to 3 to approve the fact-finding report on October 2nd.

YSU Faculty have been working without a contract since classes began on August 23. If the strike is declared it would be the first strike called by the YSU-OEA in 15 years.

The Youngstown State University Chapter of the Ohio Education Association (YSU-OEA)—which represents 337 faculty in contract negotiations—submitted a 10-day intent to strike notice last Thursday. However, the union has two meetings with the administration scheduled this week and will no doubt do everything in its power to prevent the strike action from occurring.

The YSU-OEA and university administration will meet to discuss a new contract on Wednesday with a second session scheduled for Friday. The YSU-OEA has specified that a strike vote could take place on Friday and Saturday, with the potential for a strike beginning next Monday. Since YSU uses an eight-week term system, the vote would coincide with the end of the first term with the strike beginning on the first day of Fall break.

YSU President Jim Tressel described the report as “very disappointing” and claimed that “the financial challenges of the institution were not taken into consideration as much as we would have liked.” Tressel’s statements on the fact-finding report reflect the sentiments of trustees and college administrators across the country, which are attempting to use the budgetary issues caused by the COVID-19 pandemic to ram through mass layoffs and restructuring plans.

The fact-finding report largely recommends that most aspects of the current contract go unchanged. However, the report also recommends faculty receive a paltry six percent pay increase over a three-year period.

Prior to the trustees’ vote, Mark Vopat, a spokesperson for the YSU-OEA, expressed the complete cowardice and fecklessness of the union leadership, stating: “Should the trustees reject the report, the YSU-OEA looks forward to returning to the bargaining table and hopes that the parties can swiftly negotiate a fair and equitable contract that will be beneficial to everyone.”

The decision by the YSU Board of Trustees to reject the fact-finding report was preceded by months of the YSU-OEA making toothless appeals to the administration. The YSU-OEA’s actions have worked to keep faculty at YSU isolated from other workers at the university, as well as emerging struggles of faculty at other campuses.

In June, the YSU-OEA requested that the administration delay contract negotiations and the university’s restructuring plans for a year. However, the board of trustees opted to use a potential budgetary shortfall caused by the COVID-19 pandemic to force through the restructuring of the university.

The trustees passed a \$157.9 million operating budget—a \$26.1 million reduction from the previous fiscal year—which included a massive restructuring of the university finances. According to the plan, tuition would increase by 2 percent, while management staff would have a salary reduction of 2 to 15 percent.

Furthermore, all classified and professional administrative union staff would be furloughed—resulting in a 10 percent salary reduction. The furloughs would also result in lack-of-work layoffs for 69 workers. The plan would also merge the College of Arts and Sciences with the Beeghly College of Education.

Two unions at the university have already agreed to the plan.

Despite the trustees approving the plan in early June, the YSU-OEA did not call a strike vote until the middle of July, which coincided with a decision by the University of Akron Board of Trustees to eliminate 178 positions at their university. There was no attempt to unite faculty and staff at YSU and the University of Akron.

The recent decision by the YSU trustees came roughly two weeks after the Akron chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) lost a lawsuit that allows the Akron administration to lay off 70 faculty members. The layoffs include tenured faculty.

Both YSU and the University of Akron are part of the University System of Ohio. While the two universities have separate boards of trustees, the trustees at both schools are appointed by the governor of Ohio.

Ohio Republican governor Mike DeWine has worked to exacerbate the crisis within the state's education system, calling for a \$465 million in education cuts for May and June. Out of the \$465 million, \$110 million was taken from the state's support for higher education.

The gutting of public education is not unique to Ohio or Republican-controlled states but has emerged as the official bi-partisan policy. Following the COVID-19 crisis, California Democratic governor Gavin Newsom proposed a roughly \$8 billion cut to K-12 public education.

In 2011, the US Department of Education under the Obama administration worked to block a strike of YSU faculty by threatening to withhold federal financial aid

from students if a strike took place.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the various unions have tried to prevent or shut down strikes that have emerged in opposition to the unsafe reopening of schools and workplaces. On September 16, the American Federation of Teachers directly intervened to shut down a strike of graduate students at the University of Michigan by forcing through a contract that ignored all of the graduate students' key demands.

Any struggle of faculty at YSU will rapidly come into conflict with the entire political establishment and union leadership, which have all agreed to the unsafe reopening schools and campuses.

The way forward for faculty at YSU requires the building of rank-and-file safety committees as part of the struggle to build a powerful working class movement opposed to austerity and deadly working conditions.

The WSWs encourages faculty and students to attend the next US meeting of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee—which will take place this Saturday, October 10, 3PM EDT—to learn more about building a rank-and-file safety committee.



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