

Over 300 faculty at Youngstown State University in Ohio strike for the first time in 15 years

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12 October 2020

On Monday morning, over 300 faculty at Youngstown State University (YSU), in Ohio, went on strike after contract negotiations broke down last week between the administration and the union, Ohio Education Association (OEA). Faculty at YSU have been working without a contract since August 23.

The faculty strike is the first at the university in 15 years, and is part of a growing wave of unrest among educators across the US and internationally who are opposed to deepening austerity and unsafe working conditions since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Large sections of YSU faculty have been forced to return to campus for in-person instruction. While there have not been any major outbreaks so far, there are immense dangers posed. Across the US, over 178,000 cases have been tied to over 1,400 colleges and universities that have reopened.

Last week, the YSU Board of Trustees rejected a fact-finding report that had been widely approved by YSU-OEA membership. In an expression of militancy among faculty, the strike vote concluded on Saturday with 86 percent of the 337 YSU-OEA members voting to approve the action, with only 9 percent voting against a strike and 5 percent abstaining.

The desire of the vast majority of the faculty to fight is directly at odds with the actions of the YSU-OEA leadership. Prior to the trustees' rejection of the fact-finding report, YSU-OEA spokesperson Mark Vopat expressed the cowardice 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."

On Sunday, YSU-OEA president Steven Reale similarly voiced that the union was "pleased to report that

productive conversations took place" and believed the administration had "made some small moves in both financial and non-financial areas."

The union negotiation team held a follow-up meeting on Monday with the administration. While the YSU-OEA described negotiations on Monday as productive, it might be more aptly described as a slap in the face.

The latest proposal from the administration mandates that faculty receive no pay raise in the first year of the contract, a 1 percent raise the second year, and a 2 percent raise in the third year. With inflation, this will amount to a significant pay cut over the next three years. In the second year of the contract, senior lecturers and assistant professors would also receive a \$1,000 lump sum payment, while associate and full professors would receive a \$750 payment. In the third year of the contract, health insurance premiums would also rise from 15 to 18 percent.

In a tacit recognition of the YSU-OEA's past betrayals, both the union and administration acknowledge that YSU faculty are already paid substantially less than their counterparts at other universities. According to the union, faculty at the university earn from 4 to 11 percent less than the median faculty salary at other Ohio public universities, itself already abysmal.

According to local news station WFMY, university officials are using the economic crisis produced by the pandemic to justify further austerity. The administration claims they face a \$3.7 million loss in revenue this fiscal year, while the union has stated that the university has a \$7.3 million surplus.

The union leadership has repeatedly avoided a confrontation with the administration, despite negotiations breaking down months ago. In June, the YSU-OEA appealed to the administration to delay contract

negotiations and the university's restructuring plans for a year. After the administration rebuked the union's appeal, the YSU-OEA failed to call a strike vote until mid-July at which point two other unions at the university had already agreed to the restructuring plan.

Last Friday amid the most recent faculty strike vote, the university reached a tentative agreement with the YSU Association of Classified Employees (ACE). The agreement with ACE—which negotiates contracts for administrative support workers, maintenance workers and crafts and trades personnel—includes no raise in the first year and a minuscule 1 percent raise in the second and third year. The agreement still needs to be ratified by members of ACE and the YSU Board of Trustees.

The decision by the YSU-OEA leadership to call the strike on Monday, the first day of fall break, is an attempt to dissipate anger among faculty, while setting up conditions whereby their struggle would be most isolated from other university workers and minimize the impact on the university's operations. Both YSU-OEA officials and the administration have made statements that the strike would only impact students if it continued into Wednesday, the first day of classes for the second term.

The administration has informed students that classes would resume on Wednesday, October 14 even if the strike was ongoing, while putting out a call for substitutes to act as strikebreakers if needed.

The demands raised by the YSU-OEA are a complete betrayal of the aspirations of YSU faculty. The union's only "must haves" for a new contract include: "the right of faculty to have say in their departments, programs and classes; protections for its most vulnerable faculty; maintenance of the same protections for faculty scholarship that exist at virtually all institutions of higher learning and; at a minimum, cost of living salary adjustments across the next three years and maintenance of the current health benefits plan."

The YSU-OEA demands are largely drawn from the fact-finding report that was rejected by the YSU Board of Trustees last week. The report, which was drafted by retired Michigan District Court judge Betty Widgeon, advocated for much of the language of the current contract to continue.

The university administration has particularly denounced the report's recommendation for faculty to receive a paltry 6 percent wage increase over a three-year period. The previous contract, which was ratified in 2017, included a 7 percent pay increase for teachers over a three-year period.

It is abundantly clear that the YSU-OEA has no intention to fight for a contract in the interests of the faculty. The primary role of the union is to isolate the membership and browbeat them into accepting a sellout contract that adheres to the university's austerity mandate.

Under conditions in which faculty and educators are being forced to work on the front lines of a deadly global pandemic, workers are now being told they must also bear the economic brunt of the catastrophe.

Workers and youth remember the trillions of dollars which was created out of thin air to bail out the banks and Wall Street through the CARES Act, passed by Congress with a near-unanimous vote at the onset of the pandemic. Now, when it comes to the lives and livelihoods of the working class, no resources can be found.

The demands of workers must be based not on what the politicians and school administrations claim is affordable, but what is necessary for the well-being of faculty, educators and the entire working class.

The success of the strike is dependent on rank-and-file faculty breaking out of the limitations imposed by the YSU-OEA leadership and turning outward to students and other sections of the working class, including staff, workers and teachers on their campus, across the US and internationally.

On the first day of the strike, many students joined the picket line and held signs expressing solidarity with faculty. Abby Sharpless, a forensic science major, told WKBN 27, "They support us and they believe in us, and they know that we can do great things. A lot of the people in the administration building probably wouldn't be where they are if they didn't have a teacher that fought for them, even if it ate up some of their personal life."

Across the US, teachers and faculty have joined the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee in order to mobilize the largest section of educators and workers in opposition to the unsafe reopening and continued dismantling of public education. We encourage faculty and students to contact us about building a committee at YSU, and to reject any sellout contracts that the YSU-OEA and administration attempt to impose in the coming days.



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