Faculty union abruptly ends strike at Youngstown State University

Isaac Finn
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The faculty union at Youngstown State University (YSU), in Ohio, shut down the three-day strike with an announcement that an "understanding" had been reached between the union and YSU administration at 2 a.m. Thursday morning. The rapid moves to end the walkout express the concern by the Ohio Education Association (OEA), the parent organization of the faculty union, that the strike had the potential of becoming a pole of attraction for workers to fight austerity demands.

An email sent to 21 WFMJ explained that classes would resume today, and that the YSU-OEA and administration had "reached an understanding for the general framework on a new three-year contract and will work on details for a tentative agreement" on October 15.

The tentative agreement was released later on October 15. The current agreement includes a measly 4 percent raise over three years. In the third year of the contract, healthcare premiums would also rise from 15 to 18 percent. Both the YSU Board of Trustees and YSU-OEA membership will hold a ratification vote on the contract in the next several days.

The decision to shut down the strike before a tentative agreement has even been reached can only be interpreted as an attempt to force through a concession contract after demobilizing faculty members. Faculty should reject the sellout agreement that the union is seeking to ram through and elect a rank-and-file strike committee to fight for the mobilization of all university workers and broader sections of the working class to fight the university's concession demands.

Claims that there is no money to provide decent wages and guarantee safe conditions and sufficient resources for educators and students alike must be rejected out of hand. The Democrats and Republicans have handed an estimated $4 trillion to Wall Street and top corporations, including Ohio-based Marathon Oil.

Expressing the determination of faculty members to fight, one faculty member who asked to remain anonymous told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "We were motivated by Wright State University here in Ohio where they had a 22-day strike last year. The trustees are saying that they also took a pay cut, but they make a lot more and teach a lot less and theirs was a one-time cut, not one over three years.

"They have the money. There have been no cuts and they also got CARES Act money. They are still building dorms. The most recent new dorm was filled before it was built and opened. They redid the entire football field, and we are not even having a football season. They hired a new football coach because the old one left. He hired new people—still no football season—yet half of the new hires were in athletics."

Prior to the agreement being reached, the YSU-OEA leadership had advocated recommendations from a fact-finding report, which proposed that much of the language from the previous contract be kept and that faculty receive a paltry 6 percent raise over three years.

Due to inflation, a 6 percent raise would amount to a pay cut for 337 faculty that work under the YSU-OEA contract. According to the union's own estimates, faculty at YSU are already paid 4 to 11 percent less than the median faculty salary at other Ohio public universities.

The YSU administration has claimed that they are experiencing a budgetary shortfall due to COVID-19 and have been demanding unprecedented concessions from faculty for months. This included a demand in mid-August that the university take ownership of all intellectual property (IP) produced by faculty.

While universities usually hold copyright for projects

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commissioned by the college, the YSU administration's demand for ownership of IP—such as books and articles—produced by faculty in their personal time is unprecedented. Many faculty members in the US rely on the sale of textbooks to help supplement their income.

The YSU-OEA has claimed that the current agreement has resolved the issue of IP rights.

A major reason the YSU-OEA leadership ended the strike late Wednesday, the first day students returned after fall break, was because the university was unable to operate without the faculty. Despite the administration's claim that classes would start as normal, many students at the university told media outlets that classes were cancelled Wednesday because a substitute could not be found.

In other words, the union shut down the strike because it was successful!

Rather than losing support because of the disruption of classes, the strike had a galvanizing effect on students with many current students and alumni taking to social media to express their support for the strike. Many of the posts describe the faculty as "amazing people" and demanded that they receive "a fair contract."

It is the case that young people and workers throughout the state are looking for a real fight. The Trump administration is trying to incite right-wing violence to push through its homicidal "herd immunity" policy, while both corporate-controlled parties have refused to aid the unemployed in order to force desperate workers back into unsafe factories, workplaces and schools.

YSU has also reported an increase in COVID-19 cases among the university community. According to the university, there have been 21 cases since September 5, with nine cases reported between October 3 and October 12. Out of the nine, eight are students who commute to campus and one is a staff member.

The YSU strike coincided with emerging struggles of workers across the state of Ohio, as many teachers and other workers are concerned for their safety due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic or are impacted from COVID-19 related budgets cuts. Workers at Ventra, an auto parts factory in Sandusky, have voted down a sellout contract pushed by the United Auto Workers and are pushing for strike action by the 2,200 workers at the plant. The UAW, which accepted the closure of the Lordstown plant, has been exposed for corporate bribe-taking and other corruption.

On Monday, schools in Fairborn, Ohio were forced to cancel in-person classes after bus drivers suddenly called in sick. The following day, educators at the Gahanna-Jefferson School District, outside of Columbus, Ohio, formed picket lines after the district failed to reach an agreement with the local union. Teachers and support staff in the Streetsboro School District have also voted for the union to submit a 10-day strike notice.

Far from leading an expanded struggle against austerity, OEA President Scott DiMauro recently said, "School districts and colleges and universities are really facing a resource crunch."

Workers must begin with what they and their families need, not what the Democrats, Republicans and union officials claim is affordable. That is why educators and students must build new organizations, rank-and-file workplace committees independent of the unions, to fight to defend the social and democratic rights of the working class.

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