

CUNY breaks faculty and staff contract, withholding promised pay raises

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Last week, the City University of New York (CUNY) announced that it is indefinitely delaying “equity raises” to over 2,500 low-paid assistant staff and lecturers, amid the deepening pandemic-fueled financial crisis faced by the largest urban university system in the US. The decision, made by CUNY Chancellor Félix Matos Rodríguez, violates the latest worker contract agreements. It follows CUNY’s withholding of a promised 2 percent pay raise for faculty and staff in November, which also broke the contract, and the laying off of 2,800 adjunct faculty last summer.

These depression-like cuts and austerity measures are not restricted to CUNY alone, but extend to many higher education institutions throughout the country, and in New York City—under Democratic Party control—to critical social services and infrastructure. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority is threatening to significantly reduce service this year and lay off thousands of transit workers .

The latest breach of CUNY’s contract with its employees involves withholding a salary increase of \$1,000 starting on February 1 to 1,295 assistants to “Higher Education Officers” (academic administrators), whose base salaries are \$40,869, and withholding an increase of \$1,500 starting on April 1 to 1,262 full-time lecturers, whose base salaries are \$47,598. These meager pay raises total just \$19 and \$28, respectively, per week for workers living in one of the most expensive cities in the world.

The fact that CUNY is choosing to withhold what are deemed “equity raises,” because they are going to the lowest-paid office and full-time faculty positions, is especially shameful. CUNY officials have claimed the raises will be paid eventually, but have provided no date.

This past November, CUNY announced it was withholding a contractual 2 percent raise for all unionized faculty and staff because the budget—which was slashed by over \$55 million by city and state budget cuts combined, and saw a \$52 million decline due to a 5 percent decrease in enrollment—could not afford it. The deferring of an annual 2 percent raise has also been applied to around 80,000 unionized New York state employees on Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo’s order. The governor’s recently proposed budget provides that repayment would not take effect until 2023 .

Due to this measure, adjunct professors, who already earn low wages, have been forced to take an effective pay cut for the current spring semester because the university front-loaded a portion of the pay rise last fall.

On top of this, adjuncts have pointed to CUNY’s raising of the minimum enrollment for classes by 33 percent, which has resulted in class cancellations due to under-enrollment. One CUNY adjunct took to Twitter, stating, “I’m ONE student [away] from having my class cancelled—the new minimum (16) should be our MAX. My colleagues have already suffered cuts. Let us live so we can teach, @ChancellorCUNY!”

The cutting of hundreds of academic courses in the last year has led to a ballooning of class sizes for courses that are being offered, and a petition demanding smaller class sizes at CUNY has collected over 5,000 signatures so far. Another CUNY adjunct, tweeting at the end of last semester, said, “Just learned that the class I’ve been assigned to teach next semester has doubled in size from 20 to 40 students and the class I’m teaching now has doubled from 40 to 80.”

Another measure Chancellor Rodríguez has taken to combat the fiscal crisis is ordering a five-day furlough

for top CUNY officials and administrators, whose salaries rank, by far, the highest. CUNY presidents often earn around \$300,000 a year, while Rodríguez rakes in \$670,000 a year, with a “modest” monthly housing stipend of \$7,500.

A one-week-long furlough would amount to \$12,800 in lost pay for the chancellor and around \$5,700 for CUNY presidents, while CUNY denies office staff a one-year-long raise of \$1,000, is an indication of the huge gulf between the top brass and the staff that make it possible for the university to function.

In January, it was announced that CUNY will receive \$455 million in federal funding under the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSAA) for its 25 colleges. However, officials haven’t announced any plans to walk back the extensive cuts that have taken place over the past year. Moreover, they even made the most recent “equity raise” cuts after the public announcement of this federal award.

In response to these devastating actions by CUNY, the Professional Staff Congress (PSC)—the union representing 30,000 CUNY faculty and staff members—has provided its members with no helpful answers or serious action.

The PSC has filed a class action grievance with CUNY, while instructing its members to write letters to the chancellor and to Governor Cuomo to “restore higher tax rates on the rich” because “only changing the tax system so that the rich pay their fair share will produce lasting budgetary change.”

On Monday, the PSC, desperate to keep a lid on emerging struggles and prevent a strike, called a “short, loud, vigorous” one-hour “emergency demonstration” of faculty and staff outside CUNY’s central office in Manhattan to oppose the denial of the planned “equity raises.”

PSC President Barbara Bowen, addressing the assembled crowd, tried lamely to pretend that action was being taken. “We are fighting back; the fact that we were out here immediately is a strong sign to CUNY,” she claimed. “We’ve already had some signs that they are hearing it, they’re scrambling a bit, we sent a press release out and that got a scramble. The fact that you are here, look at you, you’re so strong, so united.”

As Bowen knows very well, letters to officials, brief

rallies, press releases and pep talks will do nothing to counter the serious cuts facing CUNY workers.

One CUNY adjunct took to Twitter to oppose the PSC’s responses: “More workers are losing wages, more are going to lose their jobs outright while union executives try to grievance, legislate, and sue their way out of this. If we won’t strike now, then when will we?”

The truthful answer to that question is that the PSC will not fight. It is affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), which functions as an arm of the Democratic Party. The Democrats have proven to be no less an enemy of public education than the Republicans. Currently the AFT, closely collaborating with President Biden, is carrying out a national school reopening campaign to force educators to return to unsafe classrooms, no matter the dangers and state of the pandemic. According to the CUNY chancellor’s February 4 report, COVID-19 has so far killed 16 faculty members, 22 staff and four students.

The recent union betrayals of Chicago educators by the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and of Hunts Point produce workers in the Bronx by the Teamsters union are clear proof that the unions, basing themselves on the requirements of the profit system and not the needs of the working class, cannot be pressured to advance workers’ interests.

Conclusions have to be drawn and new workers’ organizations have to be built that genuinely defend the interests of the entire working class, including jobs, education, and health!

As the WSWs emphasized in a previous article on cuts at CUNY, faculty, staff and students must orient to the broader working class and youth in the fight against massive austerity, compounding the dangers of the pandemic. A break from the straitjacket of the unions is urgently needed. Rank-and-file committees must be organized to link up with other sections of the working class. This poses the need for a break from the Democratic Party and the fight for a socialist program.



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