

US universities have cut 650,000 jobs, a 13 percent workforce reduction, since the onset of the pandemic

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The Department of Labor published a striking report this month on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education. The report concluded that colleges and universities have cut a total of 650,000 jobs since February 2020, 13 percent of all higher education workers.

While the Department of Labor has not specified the types of jobs which have been cut, reports from university systems across the country demonstrate the damage done to university workers.

Thousands of positions for food service and custodial workers have been cut as on-campus services were slashed and dorms closed. Workers engaged in student services have also been vulnerable as services were moved online and condensed.

Some of the most notable targets of university layoffs and cuts have been adjunct faculty and non-tenured professors, who have been the subject of significant rounds of mass firings as schools move to cut costs and consolidate courses.

Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) in Troy, New York announced in May that it would not be renewing the contracts of 200 employees, including 60 full-time non-tenured faculty and an undisclosed number of adjuncts. RPI also furloughed nearly 300 employees, mostly non-instructional staff, despite university president Shirley Ann Jackson making \$5 million a year.

Over the summer, Northern Arizona University eliminated 114 non-tenured faculty. They were provided with no severance and were told they would lose their health coverage within a week.

The University of Akron eliminated 178 positions, including 23 percent of its unionized full-time faculty between the start of the pandemic and the summer of 2020. The University of Michigan laid off 173 workers,

furloughed over 3,500 and enforced more than 2,300 wage reductions.

One of the largest attacks on university staff came from the City University of New York (CUNY) system, which laid off 2,800 adjunct faculty last summer, a quarter of CUNY's adjunct staff. CUNY is now embroiled in a controversy for withholding contractually-obligated pay raises for the university's lowest paid workers.

The immediate cause of these mass job cuts is the collapse in university budgets during the pandemic. However, there is no doubt that the crisis is being utilized to push through a restructuring of higher education that will result in lower wages for professors and other school staff.

Paul Friga, a public higher education consultant for the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, analyzed budget data from 107 universities to calculate a loss to colleges and universities that totaled \$183 billion. This deficit breaks down to \$85 billion in lost revenues, \$24 billion in coronavirus expenses, and \$74 billion in predicted cuts to state funding. Even after factoring in potential federal aid the costs remain around \$150 billion.

Several major universities are reporting losses from the pandemic in the order of the hundreds of millions. The University of Massachusetts (UMass) is struggling with a \$335 million budget deficit. In an effort to alleviate the budget gap UMass sought to cut \$161 million in workforce costs through leaving vacant positions empty, short- and long-term furloughs, wage reductions and temporary and permanent job cuts.

Iowa's three public universities, the University of Northern Iowa, Iowa State University and the University of Iowa suffered a collective loss of \$208 million, with tens of millions coming from reductions in room and

board payments alone.

University of Iowa President Bruce Harreld spoke to the heart of the underlying issue behind this when he said “There’s been a generational shift in who pays for public higher education. From the state, you go back 25 years ago, you were more like 75 percent of our overall educational budget. Now it’s closer to 20 percent.”

This decline in state funding for public higher education is a trend that has affected universities across the country for years.

In 1988 the share of university funding that came from student tuition and fees was roughly 25 percent, today that figure is closer to 50 percent. Since 2008, just before the recession, government funding for education has declined considerably.

In 2018, overall state funding for public higher education was \$6.6 billion less than in 2008 after adjusting for inflation.

The effects have been devastating.

In 41 states funding was lower per student than a decade earlier, with an average decline of 13 percent per student. Meanwhile, average tuition rose by 37 percent between 2008 and 2018 as schools attempted to fill the gaps in their budgets.

Remarkably, average tuition now accounts for nearly a quarter of median household income.

Extensive cost inflation for higher education has failed to cover the gap in school budgets, however. Faced with higher costs, limited investment and declining enrollment many universities have turned to cutting costs wherever possible, particularly among faculty.

For years, universities have shifted toward utilizing adjunct and non-tenured instructional faculty as a means of reducing costs. Adjunct faculty, despite often being just as capable and experienced as their tenured counterparts, are denied full-time status. This reduces their salaries to around \$20,000 a year and removes any chance of qualifying for benefits and medical care.

Many adjuncts are forced to work additional jobs just to pay their bills and are often the first to be cut when funds need to be made available.

Anthony, an adjunct in the University System of Ohio, spoke to the WSWS about the conditions faced by adjunct faculty: “As inflation climbs, I know I won’t be given a raise to proportionally combat my increased cost of living. Nothing like that. The pay scale was set many years ago and is unlikely to change for many years to come. After 13 [plus] years as an adjunct, I’ve long since topped out.

“I go to work each day knowing that as I accrue more

credit hours, increase my level of expertise, thereby, in short, getting better at my job, it will have no bearing upon the amount [of] money I bring home to my family.”

Anthony commented on the instability that adjuncts face each year in their roles: “If I step out of line, I won’t be fired. It won’t be anything so bold as an old-fashioned canning. Instead, I simply won’t be offered any classes next semester. It’s a lot less messy that way. Maybe this semester will be when it all goes away.”

Like the overwhelming majority of adjunct professors, Anthony has been forced to work multiple jobs to make ends meet: “I had three jobs before COVID-19. One, due to pandemic-related restrictions, is closed for the foreseeable future—maybe forever. ... Because of the contractual nature of my employment—I’m not, technically speaking, a regular employee of the school—I had major issues with filing for and receiving any type of unemployment.”

Anthony also spoke on how the exploitation of adjuncts is connected to the declining quality of education provided to students: “As my position degrades, I can’t help but notice how much harder it is on the students. They, too, are greatly impacted by a system of higher education that puts money ahead of learning.”

He continued, “Semester after semester I work with increasing percentages of students who, because of budget cuts and bureaucratic disorientation, are not in a position coming out of high school to truly reach their potential once they are enrolled in college.

“Once they are in a college classroom, many of them can’t help but see and feel what the school is doing to their instructors and, subsequently, to them. The education suffers. Smart students, hard-working students—they struggle to achieve even a rudimentary level of academic success. They aren’t prepared and, frankly, sometimes neither am I.”



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