

# As strike deadline approaches, Oregon Tech officials seek state injunction to prevent walkout

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Approximately 200 full-time faculty at the Oregon Institute of Technology (OIT) in Klamath Falls in southern Oregon may strike on April 26 if an agreement is not reached between the university and Oregon Tech-American Association of University Professors (OT-AAUP). The union said 92 percent of members voted in favor of the strike authorization on April 2, with nearly the entire membership taking part in the vote.

In a last minute effort to block a strike, management has sought an injunction with the Oregon Employment Relations Board. OIT has also filed an unfair labor relations complaint against the OT-AAUP, claiming failure to bargain in good faith. The union said its lawyer was reviewing the OIT filing, calling it a "delay tactic."

Among the objectionable actions cited by the university was a no confidence vote by the Faculty Senate for OIT President Dr. Nagi Naganathan. The resolution cited the fact that Naganathan had increased salaries for administrators while allowing faculty pay to stagnate.

OIT faculty are seeking salary increases, preservation of health benefits, tenure-track job security, and clearly defined workload limits. The average faculty salary at Oregon Tech was just under \$70,000 in 2020, below other major universities across the state. As math instructor MaryLou Wogan stated in an open letter in *Herald and News*, "Presently OIT faculty earn only 87% of what their counterparts do at other Oregon institutions. During this same time period the OIT administration salaries increased by 18.7%." The union has denied a statement by the university that staff are demanding a 20 percent pay increase, merely stating

their intent to win a salary that is closer to the state average.

OIT faculty are also requesting stable health care benefits, with contract language to prevent the university from increasing costs or cutting benefits in the future, along with tenure-track protections for adjunct faculty. Further, they are seeking clearly defined workload limitations for faculty to include all of their responsibilities as part of the calculations, including things like research and student advising, not just classroom hours.

This would be the first contract since the union's formal recognition by the university in 2019. The OT-AAUP was formed in 2018 and covers all full-time faculty, instructors and librarians. If OIT faculty walk out on Monday, it would be the first time faculty at any public university has gone on strike in Oregon's history. Other faculty unions that reached the point of taking strike authorization votes ended up settling before the strike date, including at Western Oregon University and Eastern Oregon University in 2006. Faculty at Portland State University authorized a strike under the AAUP in 2014.

As in the case of previous strikes that were blocked by AAUP with the last-minute settlements, the main goal of the union is to isolate, not expand, the fight of OIT faculty. No attempts have been made to reach out to faculty and university staff at other institutions who face similar conditions. Moreover, the AAUP leadership has admitted they are doing everything they can to prevent a strike, assuring the university that a walkout is highly unlikely.

The strike vote was called after OIT administration declared an impasse on March 10 and canceled

bargaining the following day, triggering a statutory, state-mandated, timeline for exchanges of final offers, continuation of mediated negotiations, and a formal strike authorization process. The university has proposed a “merit-based” pay structure, as well as calling for a 10 percent reduction in health care premium coverage for faculty members with families. As of Thursday, April 15, “some tentative agreements were reached ... on association rights, notices of appointment, and discipline,” said Andria Fultz, an associate professor of communication and member of the OT-AAUP executive committee, “but more work needs to be done.”

Support for the faculty is widespread among students and community members, many of whom have sent letters to the president and provost urging Oregon Tech administration “to settle a fair contract as soon as possible.” More than 100 students signed a petition in late March in support of faculty members. One of those students, Alex Zendejas, told the local press that every time he hears the university administration say they are fighting for students, he rolls his eyes. “You’re using students like a shield when it hurts students—when our education is worse whenever professors are treated worse.”

The events at OIT give another indication of a growing wave of working class struggle across the US and internationally, including recent strikes of grad student workers at UC Santa Cruz, Harvard, Yale, University of Michigan, and University of Chicago, as well as a current strike at Columbia University. Faculty have struck at universities around the globe in recent months, from Youngstown State University in Ohio to the University of Sydney in Australia. These strikes and walkouts are organized not only in opposition to job cuts but also to low wages and overwork.

The struggle over these basic university issues now takes place under conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. After a year of government officials prioritizing the profit needs of the capitalist economy above human life, the world is entering the “fourth wave” of the virus as cases, hospitalizations and deaths are quickly rising, fueled by the spread of more contagious and deadly variants. Oregon’s average daily case count is now well above 700, nearly triple the state’s low in February, marking the highest level of coronavirus spread since January.

In response to the renewed health crisis, Democratic Governor Kate Brown announced the labeling of 23 counties across the state as “high risk,” which tightens some restrictions on retail and dining establishments. She has not, however, closed schools and college campuses, reiterating the false claims that children and young adults do not comprise a significant share of those infected and seriously ill. In fact, since January, the share of new cases in Oregonians age 10 to 19 has grown by roughly 50 percent while the proportion of those infected age 20 to 50 has shrunk, according to data from the Lund Report that follows national and international trends.

The danger of the pandemic greatly sharpens the character of the faculty’s struggle. They face not just a local contract, but the ongoing threat of a deadly pandemic, which is not at all being addressed by the union. Instead, the AAUP is focused on a limited number of bread-and-butter issues, framing everything through a local- or university-level lens.

The refusal of the AAUP to raise these broader issues points to the need for faculty and staff to form a rank-and-file strike committee to take the struggle directly into their own hands. OIT faculty must not allow their struggle to be isolated, but must seek support from faculty and teachers across the US and nationwide. The OIT faculty must see their contract fight as part of a growing wave of struggles in the US and internationally as workers enter the second year of a deadly pandemic in which the ruling class has subordinated all consideration of workers’ health and livelihoods to the pursuit of profit.



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