Support grows for striking faculty at Oregon Institute of Technology

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On Monday morning, roughly two hundred faculty members began an indefinite strike at Oregon Institute of Technology (OIT) after 18 months of contract negotiations. The faculty are striking for "fair wages, secure benefits, and a reasonable and clearly defined workload."

The struggle is the first public university faculty strike in the state's history, and the first contract being negotiated by the Oregon Tech chapter of the American Association of University Professors (OT-AAUP) since it was established in late-2018 to cover full-time faculty, instructors and librarians.

Dozens of faculty, staff and students showed their support on picket lines in the first days of the strike at the main OIT campus in Klamath Falls, a small city in the southern part of Oregon near Medford. There are also smaller groups of faculty on strike at the Wilsonville campus, as well as five dental hygiene professors who work at an Oregon Tech program based at Chemeketa Community College in Salem. According to one post on Twitter, local K-12 teachers even joined the picket line on Tuesday.

OIT faculty authorized the strike on April 2 with a 92 percent vote in favor of the strike, setting April 26 as the deadline to come to a tentative agreement. The strike vote was called after OIT administration declared an impasse on March 10 and canceled bargaining the following day, after which final offers were presented by both sides on March 17 and a 30-day "cooling off period" was implemented according to state law.

After attempting to arrive at an agreement last weekend, the university tried and failed to file a state injunction to declare the strike illegal, and the OT-AAUP announced what they called a "win-win offer." While the offer has not been publicly released, the union stated in a press release that it included "senior administration's proposed 45 workload hour model, but with clear definitions for non-instructional workload."

The offer also maintained health care benefits through the state's Public Employee Benefits Board (PEBB) with the university paying 95 percent of all costs but added an addendum that the benefits "could only be changed if all employees at the university also do so." In addition, the bargaining team is encouraging a pay raise model that brings salaries close to the market average based on the educational level and experience of employees.

Andria Fultz, member of the OT-AAUP Executive Committee and associate professor in the Communication Department, promoted the deal in a press release stating, "Our package not only satisfies the concerns of Oregon Tech, it aligns with values and pillars set forth in the President's Strategic Plan with a commitment to the community and institutional excellence that will ultimately lead to student success."

The university rejected this offer at 5:45 a.m. on Monday, 15 minutes before the strike deadline, claiming that its own offer was "generous" with a 13 percent salary increase over the 4-year contract period, amounting to 3.25 percent annually, with additional raises and bonuses based on performance. This meager increase would only place OIT faculty closer to the state average, given that they currently earn only 87 percent of what other faculty members at Oregon universities make, according to the union. Cost of living increases would offset that raise significantly by 2025.

Oregon Tech also rejected other elements of the union's offer, demanding to keep the current health care package in place. They also claim that the university's workload limits match what many universities have in place with other AAUP contracts.

In other words, the university is attempting to guilt faculty into accepting concessions and ending the strike, effectively saying they should be grateful for what they have already.

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Just before the strike started, administrators wrote in a press release: “Oregon Tech continues to ask the Faculty Union to consider these offers for what they are – exceptional. At this time when 1 in 9 positions in higher education has been eliminated, and when universities and colleges are facing economic uncertainty, it is prudent for Oregon Tech Faculty to value an institution that has made such an offer, and work diligently to conclude negotiations.”

In an attempt to keep classes running and break the strike, the university is covering classes with a handful of full-time faculty who crossed the picket line, lower-paid and part-time adjunct faculty, administrators and other instructors brought in from outside the university system. However, students have reported that some classes did not have replacements and were not able to run.

Negotiations are scheduled to continue on Wednesday night, and both the union leadership and the university have stated their hope to conclude the strike as soon as possible.

Despite the best efforts of the university to defame faculty members for “walking away from their classes,” the strike has received enormous support from students on the campus. Dozens of students have joined staff on the picket lines, signed petitions and spoken out in support of their instructors to combat the university’s malicious lie that teachers and students have different interests.

Alexander Zendejas and another student Shiloh Castelli have been leading the campaign to organize students in support of faculty. “We created a student statement of support and have claimed over 275 student signatures in support of faculty,” Alex told the *World Socialist Web Site* .

He continued: “We have also been trying our best to get the correct information to students, as most of them are only hearing what the admin is sending to their inboxes, which is often misleading or straight up false. I feel our effort has made a big difference in student support of faculty. We have even been crowdsourcing memes about the situation as a sort of way to get students more interested.”

Alex said the administration has been “very slimy and dishonest” by locking faculty out of their email accounts, removing their profiles off the university website and replacing them with temporary adjunct professors who were not told about the strike. He added, “The situation currently is very volatile and quickly changing.”

Many students expressed outrage that the university officials have given themselves an 18.7 percent raise while denying faculty a decent salary and increasing tuition rates over the years. “[The professors are] not trying to harm us,” a third year undergraduate student named Dahiana Padilla told *Herald and News*. “They’re doing this for the right reasons.”

The strike takes place in the wake of renewed struggle among graduate students, steelworkers and miners across the United States. On Monday, two thousand graduate students at New York University (NYU) began their strike for higher wages, improved health care and child care benefits, and the removal of NYPD cops from campus along with protections for immigrant students.

These struggles are being fueled by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has been allowed to drag on for over a year with over 3 million lives lost around the world. Oregon has one of the fastest increases in daily new cases in the country, with the “fourth wave” of the virus soaring at a faster pace than in November.

On Friday, Governor Kate Brown will move 15 counties to the highest “extreme risk” category of the state’s tier system, including Klamath County which is leading the state’s large counties with a rate of about 787 cases per 100,000 residents in the past two weeks. In response to the risk, some restrictions on indoor gatherings will be reinstated while K-12 and college campuses will remain open, even though the share of cases, hospitalizations and deaths are quickly growing.

These risks to human life add to the significance of the OIT strike, which can and must be utilized to mobilize a broader movement of students, faculty and the broader working class in the region. There exists immense potential to carry out such a struggle, which can take up a range of demands to halt the pandemic, fully fund public education and provide staff with decent jobs, secure benefits and work conditions. In order to advance this fight, an independent rank-and-file strike committee must be formed to unite faculty with campus workers, students and K-12 teachers throughout the state.

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