

Union sends Oregon Tech faculty back to work with sellout agreement

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On Tuesday, Oregon Institute of Technology (OIT) and the local chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) reached a tentative agreement to end an eight-day strike of roughly 158 faculty members.

Faculty voted by 92 percent to authorize the strike in early April after more than one year of negotiations failed to reach an agreement on basic demands for “fair wages, secure benefits, and a reasonable and clearly defined workload.” A variety of maneuvers by the university dragged out the bargaining process before the strike was finally started on April 26.

The strike attracted a huge amount of support, with dozens of fellow campus workers, students and even local K-12 teachers joining picket lines every day. Oregon Tech faculty carried out their action as working class struggles expanded across the country, including graduate students at Columbia University and New York University, who continue to fight against the United Auto Workers union’s (UAW) attempts to force through a sellout agreement.

Now, Oregon Tech instructors, librarians and other full-time staff are being sent back to work on Wednesday morning, even though a vote has not been held, details about the terms of the agreement have yet to be released, and the information that has been shared indicates none of their central demands were met. The union is celebrating the agreement as a “historic first contract,” but in reality, it is a sellout contract that will be used to enforce job insecurity, inadequate pay and unsafe work conditions over its five-year period.

While many of the precise details have been concealed, Oregon Tech officials state that the agreement includes “a guaranteed 11.5% salary increase over the life of the contract with an additional 3.5% possible through merit increases.” This amounts to a mere 2.3 percent annually, with the university determining which faculty members

meet the necessary criteria for any additional crumbs.

After the bargaining impasse in March, OT-AAUP representatives claimed they were fighting for “COLA [cost of living adjustment] and back pay” in order to “close the gap between what our faculty earn and what our faculty peers at other institutions earn.” However, the new agreement achieves neither.

According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the average salary for a professor at Oregon Tech was \$87,098 in 2018, just two-thirds the state average of \$128,831. Instructors and assistant professors earn significantly less, with average salaries of \$54,000 and \$58,000 respectively. The new agreement enforces the same inadequate pay for faculty, who often have heavy student debt burdens.

In addition, the agreement barely altered healthcare benefits, with Oregon Tech continuing to pay at least 95 percent of costs through the Public Employee Benefits Board (PEBB). The main change is that benefits can only be revoked if other campus employee unions vote to do so first.

The union also writes in its press release that workload limitations were put in place, although the language remains vague with no indication of what exact hourly workload will be maintained. “Now there are protections for faculty with regard to excess workload assignments,” the representatives write.

“Non-instructional workload is also better addressed, meaning faculty will receive workload units for advising students and other related activities that faculty do that make the university function and thrive.”

In a revealing statement, the union added, “perhaps most importantly, faculty’s right to bargain over future changes to workload is protected.” In other words, the institutional interests of the union itself has been secured.

Despite the pandemic surging in its “fourth wave” across Oregon, with Klamath County having the highest

per capita case count in the state, first- and second-year students are required to be on campus for classes along with their instructors. However, the union has refused to mention health and safety during negotiations.

When asked about what the union has done to address COVID-19 health and safety issues, OT-AAUP Secretary Kari Lundgren told a *World Socialist Web Site* reporter, “We attempted to do COVID-19 impact bargaining last spring, when the pandemic was first coming on everyone’s radar. After months of stalling, OIT admin’s bargaining team lawyers finally met with us last fall and stalled some more. Sadly, nothing came out of those negotiations.”

The sellout agreement is not a product of personal failures of the OT-AAUP leadership or the inadequacies of the union local. Rather, it is a reflection of the contemporary role of the trade unions as a whole, which prevent and suppress strikes, isolate workers’ struggles by workplace and region and accept the demands of the political establishment and corporate oligarchy.

For its part, the AAUP has been instrumental in preventing and selling out strikes at universities across the country. The recent OIT strike was the first faculty walkout in the state of Oregon’s history because the AAUP succeeded in preventing strikes at Western Oregon University and Eastern Oregon University in 2006, and then at Portland State University in 2014.

As recently as 2019, the AAUP called off a strike of over 3,000 professors and teaching assistants at Rutgers University in New Jersey after nearly three weeks of self-described “strike preparation” by the union, which followed an overwhelming strike authorization vote by union members. The settlement enforced stagnant pay, offset by inflation. In addition, the university promised to spend \$41 million on a “Faculty Diversity Hiring Initiative,” but subsequent reports indicated that the initiative would be paid for out of students’ pockets.

Last year at the University of Akron in Ohio, the Akron-AAUP proposed that faculty accept immediate paycuts in anticipation of further layoffs in 2021. The membership voted the first agreement down by a 54–46 margin.

The role of the AAUP becomes clearer when placed alongside the structural changes that have taken place in the universities over decades. Tuition costs have risen over 220 percent over the past 30 years. Moody’s wrote in 2013 that “public universities are now as market driven as private universities, but remain a lower cost option with stronger pricing power.”

Universities have decreased pay drastically for the vast

majority of faculty. A 2014 report by the *American Institutes for Research* found that the number of part-time faculty became greater than full-time faculty between 1990 and 2000 across all universities. The same report found that administration jobs have increased at a rate higher than both teaching jobs and student enrollment.

The AAUP website does not address any of these issues. Instead, it passively accepts these new conditions. The website demands that universities “reconceptualize work.” The union’s website goes on to say that “although students who work have an obligation to fulfill their academic responsibilities, colleges and universities also have a responsibility to ensure that all students—including those who work—can be successful.”

The AAUP states that working students can be supported by creating a “supportive campus culture.” The word “strike” is never used in the entire “Understanding the Working College Student” document.

With over 500 local campus chapters in the US and more than 380,000 full-time faculty members, the national AAUP alone holds assets of more than \$14.81 million, according to the Department of Labor.

The only conclusion that can be drawn from these experiences over the past several decades is that the AAUP is not an organization that represents the genuine strivings of faculty, staff and students to win high quality jobs and education for all.

Given the global character of the attacks on public education, the parochial framework of the union is incompatible with the demands of the day. Faculty must organize independently of the union apparatus and turn toward a broader struggle of educators, campus staff, graduate students and other sections of the working class. Through their own rank-and-file committees, educators can advance their interests independently of what the universities, politicians and unions say is affordable.

We urge Oregon Tech faculty and students to join, develop and expand the Oregon Educators Rank-and-File Committee as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).



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