

Faculty strike at Oakland University in suburban Detroit

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Faculty members at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan went on strike at midnight on Wednesday following the expiration of their contract. The 880 members of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) are fighting the university administration over salaries, benefits and control over academic programs. The faculty walkout began on the day that the Fall 2021 semester classes were scheduled to begin at the public university, one of the largest in the Detroit metropolitan area, with more than 20,000 students.

A statement issued by the union on Wednesday morning said the strike had the “overwhelming support of faculty” and that “negotiators were seeking cost of living increases and compensation for professors who earned exemplary performance scores from administration for teaching and research in the pandemic year.”

The university administration has responded to the strike by telling students to report to class as scheduled and that “all university classes, support services, extracurricular activities and other operations will continue on their normal schedules.” The administration also threatened the faculty, support staff and the students by declaring that “public sector strikes are illegal under Michigan law,” and called on them to end their strike.

The university administration has used the pandemic to cut compensation and benefits and undermine the positions of faculty members. While union members agreed last year to extend the previous contract for one year due to the coronavirus pandemic, the university leadership has used the state and federal pandemic funds to increase administrative staffing, pay and benefits while attacking the faculty.

The hostile posture of the university has been clear

throughout the negotiations. When the AAUP advanced the demand for a mediocre 3.5 percent salary increase, paid parental leave, increases in fellowships and better benefits for special lecturers, the administration responded by demanding pay cuts, reductions to university contributions to retirement and health care benefits and changes to academic procedures that take decision making away from faculty members.

Anger has been building for years as the compensation of the university leadership has expanded while faculty salaries have been stagnant or cut. For example, top executive positions at the university earn more than \$200,000. Oakland University President Ora Hirsch Pescovitz earns an annual salary of \$483,171.

President Pescovitz, who accepted a 20 percent reduction in compensation last year, provocatively restored her full salary in July in the midst of the contract negotiations. Meanwhile, the election of former Michigan Republican Party chairman Robert Schostak, an author of the anti-union legislation passed in the state in 2012, as Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the university made it clear that a confrontation with the faculty was being prepared.

The administration is demanding a reduction from 14 percent to 10 percent in the university’s contribution to faculty retirement plans, as well as removing dental and optical insurance and increasing the employee contribution to the health insurance plan from its current 5 percent to 10 percent in the first year of the agreement, 15 percent in the second year and 20 percent in the third year. They are also demanding they be allowed make changes to healthcare plans not mandated by providers.

The university is also demanding that faculty accept a freeze in minimum salary at current levels, a freeze in funding for research and travel, a minimal raise of \$500

for full-time faculty in the first year and then a 1 percent merit based increase for each subsequent year. It is also demanding a change in the rate of pay for summer instruction from the salary based system to a flat per-credit-hour rate, elimination of faculty choice in online-instruction and giving the administration sole control over retirement plan provider choices.

Associate Professor of English & Creative Writing Annette Gilson told the *Oakland Post*, the university's student newspaper, "In this current bargaining year, the administration is playing hard ball, insulting and devaluing the work that I and my colleagues do with proposals that would cut our compensation and drastically reduce our role in decision-making about the academic affairs of the university. What's even worse—tuition and administrative costs have been rising every year since I've been here at OU."

The AAUP has done everything to prevent a strike, and will now do everything to limit its scope and shut it down as soon as possible. An account by the *Post* of the progress of negotiations makes clear that the AAUP had entered the negotiations with the administration on its knees, praising "the university's decision making and President Pescovitz's leadership through the 2020-2021 school year."

According to the *Post* report, in May the AAUP leadership was preoccupied with "non-economic issues" such as "updated language concerning pronouns" and "expansion of groups protected from discrimination," meaningless demands which the university was more than happy to accommodate. When the minimal demand for a 3.5 percent salary increase for faculty members was put forward—an amount that is at least 2 percent less than the current rate of inflation and will actually be a pay cut—the real attitude of the university administration emerged.

The *Post* quoted a statement from AAUP President Karen Miller who said, "There were things that the other side put across the table that we thought 'Oh, come on. This is silly. ... We started getting to financial conversations ... As soon as we started talking about that stuff across the table, very quickly, people got angrier and angrier.'"

In order to win their struggle, faculty members at Oakland University must unite with all university employees and students as well as employees at other higher education institutions throughout the state of

Michigan and the US. There are local chapters of the AAUP at 10 other universities in Michigan, including the largest schools at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and Michigan State University in Lansing. However, the AAUP has not called for a statewide strike or any action by these members of their organization in support of the faculty at Oakland University.

The professors and teachers at Oakland University must organize an independent rank-and-file committee to take the conduct of the struggle against the administration out of the hands of the AAUP and the official labor movement in Michigan and the US. This is the only way to ensure that the strike is not isolated and betrayed like other struggles by blue collar and professional workers across the country.



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