AAUP at Oakland University in Michigan calls off faculty strike after two days

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7 September 2021

After two days, a strike by 880 faculty members at Oakland University (OU) in Rochester, Michigan was called off early Saturday morning, as both the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and the university administration announced that an agreement had been reached.

A statement from the AAUP said that "the two sides have reached an agreement at the table." It then announced that "the Bargaining Team is calling an end to the work stoppage effective immediately. Saturday classes will be held as scheduled. Faculty are encouraged to reach out to their students as soon as possible."

The university administration sent an email through Campus Communications titled "A Joint Message from AAUP and University Negotiator." It stated: "While this year got off to a rocky start, Oakland University and the faculty are anxious to start afresh and focus on our collective mission."

Although no details of the tentative agreement were presented to the striking OU faculty members, the AAUP told professors to take down their picket lines and resume classes immediately over the Labor Day weekend.

A statement from the president of the Oakland University local, Karen Miller, said that a summary of the terms of the agreement with the university would be sent to the membership "so that we can have informational meetings." She added that the agreement "will then be voted on by the membership."

The fact that the union called off the strike without revealing any information about the content of the new contract is a sure sign that the deal is a capitulation to the demands of the university, and that the AAUP plans on spending the coming days to impose it on the membership.

On Sunday afternoon, the independent student newspaper *The Oakland Post* published a summary of the provisions of the agreement. A preliminary review of these details shows that the AAUP has accepted a contract that betrays the demands of OU professors for salary increases and the defense of their retirement and health care benefits.

While the original demand of the AAUP was for a minimal 3.5 percent salary increase over the three year agreement—which would mean a considerable decline in real terms, given the present 5 percent annual inflation rate—the tentative agreement allows the university to implement a fixed dollar amount of total salary increases based on merit.

The maximum raise will be 1.25 percent in the first, 1.85 percent in the second and 2 percent in the third year of the agreement. The agreement also includes an insulting $500 bonus payment in the first year.

This means the increases will be capped at a specific dollar amount for the entire faculty, and the distribution of these additional funds will not be based on any objective standard such as years of service or seniority, but on performance evaluations. Some faculty members may receive the maximum allowable increase in salary, while others could receive no increase at all.

Among the other provisions of the tentative contract are an agreement to lower employer contributions to health insurance premiums to 95 percent in the first and second years, and to 90 percent in the third year. Meanwhile, the AAUP is allowing the university to reduce employer contributions to the retirement fund for all faculty hired after September 1, 2021 to 11 percent.

The OU faculty walked out on September 2, the first day of scheduled classes for the Fall 2021 semester, when the previous three year agreement with the

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university expired. The AAUP had extended the contract for one year due to the shutdowns and dislocation during the first year of the coronavirus pandemic.

After the union bargaining committee advanced the mildest of economic demands during negotiations, the university administration adopted a hostile stance and said there would be no salary increases and insisted on cuts to retirement and health care benefits. This was after the university had increased tuition by 4.2 percent for the 2021-22 academic year and received nearly $14 million in federal coronavirus emergency funding.

An indication of the sentiments of the OU faculty and the university community to the terms of the new agreement was given by one reader of the *Oakland Post*, who commented: “The terms of the new contract and circumstances leading to it—many weeks of negotiations and a strike—indicate that the Board of ‘Mistrustees,’ President Pescovitz and her clique are no allies of public good, Oakland University, or faculty, staff, and students. The value of the words about their appreciation of our faculty and commitment to student success is now known, and the value is 0 (zero).”

It is well known on campus that the university executives and top administrators make four to five times the salary of faculty members, and Oakland University President Ora Hirsch Pescovitz, who receives $483,171 annually, makes as much as eight times that of faculty members. There is enormous support for the faculty as well as anger toward the university administration on the part of the students and staff.

Dozens of letters were submitted to the *Oakland Post* from students, faculty members and retirees supporting the struggle of the faculty members against the university administration and its aggressive attacks on the income, benefits and rights of professors and teachers.

The Oakland University faculty should reject the sellout deal that has been presented by the AAUP. The reactionary merit-based compensation system and the other concessions on benefits must not be accepted. The opposition of OU faculty, students and staff against these policies must be united with those of the other public universities and colleges in Michigan and throughout the US, where higher education employees are facing similar attacks.

Faculty members at OU should organize an independent rank-and-file committee to coordinate the opposition to the sellout agreement and take the fight against the university administration into their own hands. The struggle for improved and equal compensation across the entire faculty and for improved retirement and health care benefits cannot be left to those who accept the lying arguments of the university administration that there is no money available to fund them.

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