

Howard University non-tenured teaching staff and adjunct professors rally for improved pay and conditions, plan three-day strike

Nick Barrickman
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Several hundred Howard University non-tenured faculty and adjunct professors are planning a three-day strike next week starting March 23 if their demands for living wages and better working conditions are not met.

Located in Washington D.C., Howard ranks among the nation's premier Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) with a school endowment of over \$712 million. The university has over 150 non-tenure-track professors and about 200 adjunct teachers who are members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 500.

According to the SEIU, Howard adjuncts and non-tenured teachers "are among the lowest paid faculty compared to four-year institutions in [Washington] D.C." In addition, the teachers are responsible for "over 2,000 courses per year."

"I'm not sure what the job market is like, but obviously it is very stressful," Joseph, a Howard student told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "I know of one professor that said that 'Howard University doesn't pay enough for me to cover health care costs [even though] I just had a child.'" A Howard educator explained that they had to commute from Richmond, Virginia, nearly a two-and-a-half-hour commute back and forth, every day to teach classes.

Howard's non-tenure-track full-time faculty are among the lowest paid college workforces in the D.C. area and the 19th lowest paid among all HBCUs, according to the SEIU. In addition to pay, full-time non-tenure-track faculty must hire on yearly and have contracts which "max out" after seven years. At that point, they are "arbitrarily fired... no matter how effective their teaching," states an informational flier.

On Wednesday, nearly 500 students and faculty rallied on campus. The rally, organized by the SEIU, was addressed by many faculty members.

"Despite how much we love working here, the difficult working conditions make it unsustainable," Yael Kiken, a full-time non-tenure-track lecturer in the English department told the crowd. "Our salary is too low to afford essential

costs like child care. Each year we have to re-apply for our jobs. This means there is no guarantee that we will have employment from one year to the next. This is especially scary now that I have a child."

Another teacher described the process of acquiring parental leave as "a nightmare."

"I received misinformation about how to apply from human resources and spent hours doing research to figure out what we were legally entitled to. Every place else that we have worked had clearly-stated policies for this type of leave. No such document exists at Howard," she said.

For its part, the administration at Howard released a statement to its student body on the teachers' plans for a strike. "If a strike were to occur, courses would continue as scheduled by our non-unionized faculty," the university claims. In response to the faculty demands, the email states that its "7-year rule" among non-tenured teachers ensures "the flexibility that the University needs to meet and manage fiscal needs, and protect the integrity of the tenure process."

A Howard cleaning worker told the WSWS that she hoped teachers and other workers would "all go on strike together," demonstrating the immense potential for a united struggle of all campus workers. "We are all treated very badly here," she noted.

According to *HBCU Lifestyle*, "[o]ver the last 150 years, Howard University has become the most prestigious historically black college and university in the United States. It was chartered by Congress in 1867, and today, it is a world-renowned institution in the heart of Washington D.C." The university is ranked as second among all HBCUs in terms of its academics and 110th among all universities in the United States.

Howard president Wayne A.I. Frederick currently is paid \$1.64 million in salary, placing him near the top of the list of highest paid college presidents. The school's board of trustees is a "who's who" of big business representatives and Democratic Party-aligned officials. A lawsuit filed

against the university in December alleged that the school was “disenfranchising” Howard students, alumni and faculty “at the highest level of the university’s governance.”

Howard attracted national attention last summer after it hired Nikole Hannah Jones, *New York Times* Magazine staff writer and author-curator of the *1619 Project*, a racist falsification of American history which has since become a book, as a tenured faculty member. In addition to being given tenure, which was central to Hannah Jones’s choosing Howard, the journalist-media celebrity was awarded \$20 million to found the “Institute for Journalism and Democracy.”

“Nikole Hannah Jones is taken care of [by the university]. A lot of our professors that have been here for years are not taken care of,” Howard student Joseph told the WSWS. “You can’t really come here and say you’re here for ‘the black community’ and then turn a blind eye to the injustices that are happening to your colleagues.”

The threat of a faculty walkout comes nearly five months after Howard students occupied the campus’s Blackburn Center, citing incidences of black mold and fungus as well as vermin infestation in their dorms. An agreement ending the occupation between students and the college forbids the former from discussing if their conditions had been met.

Despite claims made at the time that the school would “support faculty, research and students,” many students who have spoken with the WSWS explain that little has changed since last semester. “Last semester we had mold, asbestos... in the buildings. But recently another hall flooded,” said Jamarri. He explained that students living in Cook Hall had been required to relocate to Drew Hall. “It’s a freshman dorm and now they’re all crammed up,” he added.

The poor working conditions for campus faculty, along with the existence of mold and infestation among campus dorms, gives lie to the claim made by advocates of racial identity politics that Howard, as an HBCU, is more democratic or responsive to the needs of its predominantly African American student body because of the similar racial background of its administrators.

“Generally, students are all in support of the non-tenure track faculty and if there was a way to get every student to show up and go on strike with them we totally would,” said Candice. “There is no divide between students and faculty. It’s between administration and everyone else.

“Beyond that, it’s a divide between the powers that manipulate the administration and the decisions that they make and... higher education,” she said, adding “tuition is \$48,000 per year without financial aid. The campus administration says if it pays teachers more, it would have to raise tuition, but that’s nonsense because tuition goes up every year anyway and they never increase pay for

professors.”

The teachers’ eagerness to strike and gain decent job conditions flies in the face of the SEIU’s limited demands. Local 500 has merely called for a three day “unfair labor practices” strike, citing the university’s stalling tactics which have lasted for years.

The SEIU and its affiliates have been responsible for imposing a series of concessions agreements on workers wherever it operates. This includes the anti-democratic treatment meted out to 460 Amcor workers in Indiana last summer who twice voted “no” on concessions only to have the SEIU-affiliated Workers United union impose a sellout contract anyway in order to avoid a threatened strike.

There is good reason to believe that SEIU Local 500 will call off the threatened action, claiming at the last minute that the Howard administration has agreed to “bargain in good faith,” or will isolate the strike which is has already limited to just three days, in order to avert a wider movement of workers and students from developing.

Rather than waiting to be isolated and betrayed, Howard educators must form an independent rank-and-file committee controlled by teachers and school workers themselves to carry their fight forward and unite their struggle over low pay and lack of job stability with the millions of workers across the United States and internationally who confront the same social and economic issues. The WSWS will provide full assistance to those at Howard interested in forming such a committee. Click here to contact us and find out more.



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