

Howard University lecturers' union announces "historic victory" in tentative agreement, calls off strike

Nick Barrickman
23 March 2022

On Wednesday morning, the bargaining representative for nearly 350 Howard University adjunct and non-tenure track (NTT) professors posted a brief message to its social media page calling off the strike that was planned to begin that day.

The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 500-affiliated University Lecturers Union declared that a "historic victory" had been won at the HBCU (Historically Black College and University) located in Washington D.C. and that a tentative agreement (TA) was being offered.

"At 3:26 a.m. on March 23, 2022, the non-tenure track faculty and SEIU Local 500 reached a tentative agreement with Howard University administration," the union's message stated. While noting that the TA was still subject to member ratification "in the coming weeks," the strike was being called off immediately.

Adjunct and NTT professors have been engaged in negotiations with Howard for nearly three years. During that time, "Union leaders... have accused the university of ignoring requests for information, walking out of contract bargaining meetings and canceling meetings at the last minute," reports the *Washington Post*.

According to the SEIU, based on the cost of living, Howard professors are the lowest paid among all HBCUs. Adjunct and non-tenured professors are forced to work multiple jobs simply to make ends meet. In addition, NTT professors are summarily fired after seven years (the "7 year rule"). The university claims hiring qualified teachers after this period could "result in significant financial harm" to its bottom line.

University adjuncts make between \$25,000 and \$50,000 a year according to the American Federation of

Teachers. According to *Apartment List*, Washington D.C. has a cost of living which is "higher than your average" with "comparable rents to New York [City] and Miami [Florida]." It notes that rent costs have increased by 6.9 percent in the past year.

Numerous students and faculty had given their support to the teachers in the days before the planned walkout. "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," a Howard student told the *World Socialist Web Site* last week.

Nearly 500 students and faculty rallied in support of the teachers at an event held on campus last week. The *Post* reported on Wednesday that "some students have been disciplined for participating."

The SEIU posted no further information substantiating the claim that a "historic victory" has been won. SEIU officials had spoken publicly in the days before the planned strike, insisting that "progress" was being made. "After all this time, this is the first time real negotiations are taking place," stated lead SEIU negotiator Larry Alcott to the *Post*. This comment came after the campus lecturers' Twitter account stated that "we remain far from a settlement, and continue to organize equally for the strike as we work to try to reach an agreement."

In response to the announcement, Howard's provost published a statement declaring the administration was "pleased to announce" the agreement and that "the union has agreed to call off its three-day strike and ensure that students continue to receive coursework as planned." The provost claimed to "respect the bargaining process that our union-faculty are entitled

to, and it is in the spirit of that commitment that our leaders remained in hours-long negotiations until an agreement was reached.”

It is entirely possible that no agreement at all has been reached and that the SEIU and the Howard administration has come together “in good faith” simply to avert a strike which had considerable support throughout the region and would place further pressure on the university after lawsuits and student occupations have exposed deplorable living conditions.

As a premier HBCU, Howard has attracted national headlines recently, as it hired media celebrities such as Nikole Hannah-Jones, author of the *New York Times*’1619 Project, a racist falsification of American history, as well as media commentator and reparations advocate Ta-Nehisi Coates to its tenured faculty. University President Wayne A.I. Frederick has a reported salary of \$1.6 million and the school has a significant endowment of \$712 million.

“I hope that they [the teachers] aren’t settling for less than what they want,” a student told the WSWS. “Howard has a history of just putting band aids on things.”

The faculty’s threat to strike came less than five months after a group of students occupied Howard’s Blackburn administration building in protest against unsanitary dorm living conditions. This included widespread vermin infestation and black mold growing in the ventilation systems and living quarters.

On Wednesday, Howard students posted pictures on Twitter showing seriously overheated dorms. “Students in Howard Plaza West are experiencing hell right now. This is not an exaggeration,” says one post, showing a temperature reading above 80 degrees.

“How are students expected to sleep in this? Do their homework in this? On top of that, HPW [Howard Plaza Towers-West] has experienced a flood and multiple power outages in less than ONE MONTH!” the student tweeted. The student added that students pay “anywhere between 3k–6k+” to live on-campus.

The *Washington Post* reported on Wednesday that Howard would invest significant funds into renovation efforts “thanks to a year of historic philanthropy and enrollment growth.”

The \$785 million investment “include[s] a new health sciences complex to house the medical school and other programs, a center for arts and communications, and a

building dedicated to science, technology, engineering and math fields.” The university made no attempt to square this announcement with its previous claim that offering its employees job stability and a living wage would cause it “significant financial harm.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact