

# Illinois State University workers authorize strike, while Champaign teachers union reaches deal to avert walkout

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Workers in K-12 and higher education systems in central Illinois recently expressed their overwhelming support for strike action, as anger continues to build in the working class over the surging cost of living, eroding working conditions and decades of bipartisan attacks on public education.

In Champaign, Illinois, elementary school teachers in the Unit 4 school district had voted in late January by 91 percent to authorize a walkout. However, the Champaign Federation of Teachers, an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), had stalled on setting a strike deadline for the 700 teachers until March 28. Early Wednesday morning, the CFT then announced it had reached a tentative agreement with the district but has not revealed any details of the proposal, saying it would not make the terms of the agreement public “until it is formally approved by both parties.” A vote on the proposal is set for April 5.

In Champaign, the CFT had previously stated it had already come to an agreement with the district on wages, but that the length of the school day was a sticking point. The Champaign Board of Education proposed to add 45 minutes to the school day, which is opposed by teachers who already feel severely overworked and burned out.

While the details of the tentative agreement remain unpublished, the Board of Education had in earlier statements indicated that teachers were offered an annual raise of approximately 4.25 percent, a rate that is well below the current inflation level of nearly 8 percent, amounting to a substantial cut in real income.

In nearby Normal, Illinois, building service workers at Illinois State University voted last Friday by 96 percent to authorize a strike. American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 1110 has set April 1 as the final bargaining day. Negotiations with ISU

have also been dragged out by AFSCME for months before a strike vote was held, with the previous contract for the roughly 350 workers having expired in mid-2021.

In a statement on the strike vote at ISU, the university administration said that it hopes to reach a “fiscally responsible contract agreement”—in other words, maintain low wages and austerity.

The workers have already overwhelmingly voted down one contract proposal brought back by AFSCME, according to a local National Public Radio affiliate. ISU nevertheless imposed the terms of that offer, the station reported.

The service workers handle a variety of jobs for the university, including working and managing the dining halls, janitorial duties, and grounds and building maintenance. President of AFSCME Local 1110 Chuck Carver told the press that he had hoped to avoid a strike but that the university administration’s refusal to grant any pay increases had left no alternative. Carver said that despite the overwhelming support of workers for a strike, the union had not committed to it, saying, “If they come back with a great offer, this is just for show.”

Many of the campus workers at ISU live in poverty-level conditions, with a starting pay rate barely above \$13 per hour, less than that offered at some fast food chains. One food service sanitation worker, Tia Reece, interviewed in ISU’s student newspaper the *The Vidette*, explained her working conditions, saying, “Every day, I do dishes, take out trash and clean floors in the Watterson Dining Center so that our students have a clean place to eat. The students are why we work here, to see them start as freshmen and watch them grow, meet some of their families and then watch them graduate. Sometimes it’s almost like being a foster mom.”

Reece explained that in order to make ends meet and

cover expenses for her and her 17-year-old son, including her medical prescriptions, she has to work as many overtime hours as possible. She concluded saying, “We’re going to stand up for ourselves until this university gives us the respect we deserve.”

The announcement of the tentative agreement in Champaign and the strike authorization vote in Normal comes amid a growing wave of militancy by educators and school staff across the US, driven by the catastrophic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and anger over the surging cost of living. Far from linking up these struggles on a national or broader scale, however, the teacher unions are seeking to contain and suppress them, and enforce the demands for austerity by the Democratic Party.

In Minneapolis, the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers (MFT), also an AFT affiliate, recently shut down a more than two-week-long strike by roughly 5,000 educators. The MFT rushed through a sellout agreement last weekend, giving virtually no time to seriously study and discuss the contract proposal. One Minneapolis teacher told the WSWS that the vote was “very problematic for many members. The union provided limited locations and hours for members to vote over the weekend. Many members are out of town or working this weekend. The union rejected online voting and did not offer alternative voting options if members were unable to vote this weekend.”

In Sacramento, California, meanwhile, approximately 5,000 teachers have been on strike for more than a week, fighting against unsafe conditions in the school and chronic understaffing from the COVID-19 pandemic. The teachers there have been working without a contract since June 2019 while inflation over that period rose by 11 percent.

A strike by 300 teachers at Proviso District 209 in suburban Chicago also recently ended after two weeks. Teachers went on strike for smaller class sizes, defense of their retirement plans, and substantial pay improvements. Similar to Champaign, the union did not make the details of the agreement public. The Proviso Teachers Union announced yesterday that the deal had been ratified, but did not release the vote totals.

Similar issues have arisen in both the Champaign-Urbana and Bloomington-Normal metro areas, which are home to large state universities. Both ISU and the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) have seen staggering numbers of COVID-19 infections among college students during the pandemic, causing a spread to

broader communities. At the peak of the Omicron wave, both Normal and Champaign saw thousands of infections per day.

In Champaign and Normal, as well as Minneapolis and Sacramento, teachers and education workers are finding themselves in a political struggle against the Democratic Party, which has long dominated the Illinois state government. Despite record corporate profits during the pandemic—with 2021 being the most profitable year for US corporations since 1950—the Democrats, as well as the Republicans, are insisting that there is no money to pay workers a livable income or fully fund education.

Such claims are a massive fraud. While they claim there is no money available for workers, earlier this week President Biden announced a proposed government spending bill that included a record \$813 billion for the military, \$42 billion for Border Patrol, and \$30 billion for police.

There is no shortage of money available to provide educators, workers at schools and universities and all other workers with a decent standard of living. However, the capitalist class and their representatives in the Democratic and Republican parties are determined to devote every dollar created by workers to private profits and the US war machine.

Workers must be prepared to take up an independent struggle against both their employers and the unions, who are working behind their backs with the Democratic Party to sell out their struggles and force through concessions contracts that provide no real gains.

The Socialist Equality Party urges education workers to independent rank-and-file committees, run by workers themselves and independent of both the pro-corporate unions and the big business political parties. Such committees would allow workers to formulate demands based on what they actually need and provide the organizational means for workers to unify and coordinate their struggles across the US and beyond.



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