

American University administrative staff set to walk out amid contract negotiations stalemate

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On Monday, nearly 550 American University (AU) staff and academic workers are set to walk off their jobs for a five-day strike. Contract negotiations have stalled between the union and the private university, located in Washington D.C.

Last week, staff members voted by 91 percent to strike if an acceptable contract is not reached by August 22. The work stoppage comes as students have begun arriving for the fall semester, which is scheduled to begin August 29.

Staff administrators and academic counselors, who are members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 500, have been seeking a contract from the school since their bargaining unit was first officially recognized in 2020.

They have accused the university of unfair labor practices after negotiations have dragged out for over a year. A statement from Local 500 says, “After a year and a half of negotiations, American University has doubled-down on frankly offensive proposals (6% over three years—when inflation is nearly 9% in 2022 alone!).”

In a demonstration of the substantial support among students and the community, a GoFundMe account raising funds for the week-long stoppage has already received nearly \$18,000 in small donations.

The local also accuses AU of withholding “annual merit increases for 2022 from union-eligible staff, an annual increase that has been in place for over a decade.”

The AU strike comes amid a wave of strikes among workers facing eroding living conditions amid record-setting inflation levels. Annualized inflation currently stands at 8.5 percent.

Washington D.C. and the near-suburbs are among the most expensive locations in the country, and the cost of living is “comparable [rents] to New York [City] and Miami [Florida],” according to *Apartment List*. A June survey of food banks in the region found one-third of the region’s population struggled to feed itself in 2021. This has only worsened with the onset of inflation.

The strike comes as the Democratic Party-governed District of Columbia is sending students back to unsafe schools, even as the pandemic rages. A report in the *Washington Post* published Friday noted, “Students and employees who are exposed to the virus will need to quarantine only if they show symptoms” as they return to classes in the city.

Throughout the country, the cost of living and working conditions have both accelerated the class struggle. In Columbus, Ohio, nearly 4,500 educators are also poised to strike Monday, as the public school district has refused to meet workers’ demands in their contract. A “final offer” presented to the city’s teachers in July was rejected on the spot.

Schools have faced increased difficulty in finding staff to fill positions for the new semester. The BLS has reported a shortfall of over 200,000 educator and support staff positions this fall throughout the country. According to the social media account “School personnel lost to Covid,” at least 2,400 school staff have died due to the virus. The United States government keeps no detailed statistics about the number of educators killed in the pandemic.

While educators and staff are willing to fight, they face resistance not only from the school but from their own union, the SEIU. Despite citing high inflation, the SEIU is only demanding a wage increase of 5 percent

for the first year of the contract and 4 percent the next. The local has reserved the right to end the strike at any given time, even before the pre-decided end next Friday.

The strike is being purposefully held in the week before classes start, so that the shortage of staff has a minimal impact on the functions of the university. In a statement to the “AU Community,” the university administration stated it was “prepared to support our community and continue Welcome Week activities, WCL classes, and student services.”

In addition to the purposefully ineffective timing of the strike, the SEIU has kept the 550 administrative staff and counselors isolated from fellow workers at the same campus. According to the SEIU Local 500 web page, at least two other sections of workers at American University are covered by the local—grad students and adjunct professors.

Despite their close proximity and shared difficult working conditions, these workers have not been asked to join the work stoppage. This occurs even as AU adjuncts have held protests on the campus as recently as March.

This forced separation of workers is an ongoing tactic of Local 500 and the trade union bureaucracy as a whole. In March, the organization called off a planned strike of 350 non-tenured and adjunct faculty at Howard University, declaring a “historic victory” had been reached between the local and the school. At the time, the local had refused to publicly reveal any of the details of the contract that was offered.

Gradually, details emerged that the contract which had been vigorously celebrated by the SEIU addressed none of the university educators’ demands. This only came out months after the local had called off its own strike, taking to social media in late May to complain that Howard officials “were not holding their end of the deal to HU professors!”



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