

American University staff union calls off five day strike against poverty-level pay and management abuses

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About 550 American University staff, clerical and advisory workers represented by Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 500 concluded a five day walkout Friday after announcing a deal with the campus management. The strike ended on the last day of the scheduled walk out.

While the deal has been publicly announced, few details on the reported offer were available publicly.

The local simultaneously announced a separate tentative agreement (TA) for its adjunct faculty members, who had been working without a contract while the administrative staff had been on strike.

Calls to the SEIU Local 500 office to determine the details of the TAs were met with an automated messaging system.

The AU workers' strike brought them into a conflict against not just the campus, but against the Democratic Party and corporate apparatus.

School staff struck after the university, a private school in Washington D.C. headed by President Sylvia M. Burwell, a former member of both the Democratic Clinton and Obama administrations, broke off negotiations with the SEIU earlier this month. The university's Board of Trustees demonstrates the unholy nexus existing between the Democratic Party and big business. Its members consist of well-connected Democratic Party operatives, such as Burwell, alongside representatives of numerous insurance brokerage firms, consulting firms and other foundations.

The university, which had an endowment of \$884 million as of 2021, has offered staff workers raises totaling 5.5 percent over the course of three years with potential merit pay increases of only 1.5 percent available for workers who go above-and-beyond expectations.

This is under conditions in which the rate of inflation was 9 percent in June. "After COVID, nothing is less than \$30. Everything's expensive, I don't even shop now," said a staff worker in comments to the *World Socialist Web Site*.

"I've worked here for 22 years and have had to hold a separate part-time job for 14 years," they said. "After my first paycheck I couldn't pay rent! I lost money working here for the first 14 years."

Workers demanded an end to the school's arbitrary pay structure, which creates a *de facto* tier system, with senior workers laboring alongside newer employees hired for higher pay. In addition, the merit pay system means that an employee's well-being is contingent upon the approval of their supervisor.

"The idea that I would be able to go above and beyond in my professional development goals for the year to maybe earn this extra 1.5 percent, is not a consistent reliable measure," stated academic coach Amanda Kleinman to the *DCist*. "To exceed those goals, even if you do have a good supervisor, becomes this uphill battle that you never seem to reach the top of."

Other striking workers explained the school's unfair pay system. "There's no way to move up within my pay structure," said a worker to the WSWs. "In 2015 [AU] gave us a stipend because they said they didn't have any money. Since then, I've only gained \$2.60 in the last 6 years working here. My coworker tells me he only got \$25 more after taxes with the raises he's had."

During the strike, numerous striking workers spoke out publicly, asserting that they had been forced to work during the pandemic and now are being forced to endure its impact financially. "I was here through the pandemic working virtually," said one worker. "I am striking because I have seen so many of my co-workers walk out the door. I have seen at least half of the people who voted to unionize leave without getting a contract."

The strike was met with a warm reception and support from the campus community, with hundreds of students and other staff members showing up to the picket line in support. This is despite the university's attempt to pit the workers against the campus student body.

On Wednesday, striking workers momentarily blocked traffic entry as students were moving onto campus. Despite this inconvenience, hundreds of AU freshman students denounced Burwell and walked out during their first year convocation when the school president sought to address the incoming student class.

"The strike is pretty engaging. I went to a few climate strikes

before. This is definitely a different atmosphere, but I think it is a good cause because of the huge amount of money our president is making while the faculty is making nothing,” said Zay, a freshman who had joined the picket line on Friday, speaking to the WWSWS.

“This strike raises important issues. Workers produce the wealth, but they are not paid,” said Luis, another first year student in attendance. “That is capitalism, it produces profit at the expense of the workers. The cost of living keeps rising. This is a movement that shows that when there is injustice there must be resistance.”

He added: “I’m 18 years old. I’m living off-campus because of the cost of living. With tuition and room and board it’s hard to afford living here. It’s even harder for workers who had to take a pay cut since the pandemic started. The cost of everything has gone up.”

While the workers were determined to win decent pay and their struggle was warmly received by the campus community, the SEIU restrained the strike in order not to impact the school’s functions. The SEIU kept it confined to only one group of workers even though Local 500 represents not only administrative staff and counselors, but graduate students and campus adjuncts.

“Their [the other workers at the school affiliated with the local] contract expired, and then they got a contract extension and can’t do anything. Bad move,” one worker explained to the WWSWS. “Whoever was previously in charge at SEIU (local 500) had that put in their contracts.” When asked about this, an organizer for Local 500 was dismissive, saying “lots of unions have them.”

“You can imagine how impactful a strike of all the workers would be,” said a second-year student when the WWSWS asked about the impact of expanding the strike to other members of the faculty. “Right now, only first-year advisors’ classes would be canceled. But graduate students teach full sections of classes. Lab sessions would be closed. Things like that.”

AU workers should be under no illusions that their struggle has concluded. While celebrating their “win,” the local revealed few details about the tentative contract. Even if the workers gain the maximum wage increases being demanded—nine percent over the course of two years—they will still be behind inflation and lose pay during the contract.

Furthermore, it is possible that the SEIU called off the strike with no actual agreement in place, only the school’s promise of further negotiations. The strike’s end was intentionally set for Friday, August 26 to avoid impacting the regular semester and so that the administration was under no pressure to come to an agreement.

On several occasions, *World Socialist Web Site* reporters and their supporters who raised these criticisms were physically confronted by SEIU officials, who denounced them and forbade workers from speaking to them. On one occasion, a supporter was physically assaulted by an SEIU representative who

attempted to rip leaflets out of his hands.

Such intimidation tactics are fundamentally aimed at workers who dare raise criticism of the strategy and political ties of the SEIU.

Alluding to some of the financial motivations behind the ending of the strike, *Forbes* reported Friday that “Most college and universities have been welcoming students to campus during the past two weeks.. with hopes that enrollments will rebound, threats from the Covid-19 pandemic and monkeypox will subside, and classes and other campus activities will return to normal after two years of almost constant disruption.”

The business publication notes that “Five institutions are also beginning the new academic year with particularly good news, in the form of major gifts supporting various campus priorities.” This includes AU, which received a “\$10 million gift from Board of Trustees member and alumnus Alan L. Meltzer, and his wife, Amy Meltzer. The gift will be used to build a new athletics facility, to be named the Alan and Amy Meltzer Center for Athletic Performance.”

“The current gift follows a 2019 \$5 million commitment from the couple for the center,” *Forbes* notes. It quotes Burwell, who declares “The Meltzer Center for Athletic Performance will elevate the AU student experience and propel generations of changemakers to future success.”

The SEIU apparatus itself forms a critical constituency for the Democratic Party. Mary Kay Henry (who makes a \$289,000 yearly salary), was named one of *Washingtonian* magazine’s most influential people in a May edition this year. According to the magazine, Henry is “Arguably the most influential union voice within the White House,” contributing significant sums to implementing the President’s big business agenda.

Biden has intervened in numerous workers’ struggles on the side of management, utilizing the trade union bureaucracy to restrain workers’ struggles over wages under conditions of a growing strike wave against inflation and the ongoing pandemic.

This is what occurred among adjunct and non-tenured educators earlier this year at nearby Howard University. In March, Local 500 called off a planned strike at the last minute. Teachers were told that a “historic victory” had been won. Several months passed before it was revealed that negotiations had stalled again and that the university administrators “were not holding their end of the deal to HU professors!”

Finally, a contract was signed which offered teachers “market level” pay increases without meeting any of the other demands raised by the educators. Elsewhere, the local has assisted employers in implementing job cuts and layoffs.



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