

Eastern Michigan University faculty vote 91 percent for strike

Sheila Brehm**6 September 2022**

Faculty at Eastern Michigan University (EMU) in the Detroit suburb of Ypsilanti voted overwhelmingly for strike action Tuesday evening at an online meeting. The strike by the 500 members of EMU-AAUP (American Association of University Professors) is set to begin Wednesday morning.

Professors and faculty have been working without a contract since August 31. EMU, a public university, was founded in 1849 as a teachers' college and has 15,000 students.

The 91 percent vote is a powerful call for action against the administration's attempt to impose stiff increases in premiums and out-of-pocket health care costs. The minuscule salary increases proposed by EMU would immediately be eaten up by inflation and increased expenditures for health benefits.

The university is offering a salary increase of 15.2 percent over the course of a five-year contract. With inflation presently running at 8-9 percent annually, this would mean a major cut in real wages. EMU President James Smith's annual salary is \$455,000.

The university's proposals are a provocation. The major issue is the attempt to force faculty and their families to abandon Preferred Provider Organizations (PPOs), which offer better health care coverage, and force them into more restricted and lower quality Health Maintenance Organizations (HMOs).

It appears that EMU is planning to become compliant with Michigan's Public Act (PA) 152. The law presents public institutions, such as universities, with hard caps on what they can contribute to employee health care premiums. The caps are set by the Michigan State Treasurer.

Since the university was previously contributing money beyond the caps under PA 152, the change demanded by the EMU administration means that out-

of-pocket premium costs for professors will sharply increase. For example, the university's PPO plan for a family costs \$28,523 per year. The university's contribution to this cost under PA 152 will be capped at \$20,180, requiring the employee to pay out-of-pocket premiums of \$8,343. Under the old contract, the out-of-pocket cost to the employee was \$3,018.

EMU falsely claims that its proposed \$3,200-\$3,600 increase in base salary will offset the increase in health care costs.

The contract that expired last week was a two-year extension of the previous contract signed in 2015. The extension, to which the AAUP agreed, included a pay raise of 1.75 percent in 2020 and 1.6 percent in 2021. Over the same period, there was a 7 percent increase in health care costs.

While professors and faculty have demonstrated that they want to fight, the officials of the AAUP have shown that they have no intention of leading the type of struggle that is needed.

The union's counteroffer is a miserable capitulation. It is proposing a three-year contract that admittedly accepts "the University-wide premium rates in addition to the [health] care plan design changes (co-pays, deductibles, out-of-pocket maximums, etc.)." The union acknowledges that "these changes will cost our members \$1.1 million in year one, \$1.28 million in year two, and \$1.53 million in year three."

It continues: "We therefore proposed a one-time addition to base pay of \$3,200 to compensate for this drastic increase in healthcare costs. ... We then proposed a 6.0 percent raise [over three years]."

The union leadership goes on to admit: "Our proposal would not even return the faculty budget to 2021-2022 levels for the first two years of the contract."

In fact, the union counteroffer would give up for all

time the existing health insurance plan for one that would entail ever-rising out-of-pocket costs. In addition, it would accept a massive cut in real wages over three years (6.0 percent under conditions of annual inflation rates of 8-9 percent) with no cost-of-living escalator.

There is widespread support among EMU students for the professors. The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to students on campus.

Dale, a student studying broadcasting/communications, said, “Apparently, EMU is not budging and won’t give the faculty what they want. I don’t know much about the strike situation, but I do know that our washing machines catch fire, and I heard they’re spending hundreds of millions of dollars on those new residence halls.”

Miles, a first-year student, remarked, “I don’t want my teachers to leave in my first year, but I also don’t think people should be underpaid. Especially with inflation now, everything’s going up.”

Anthony, another first-year student, said, “Doesn’t sound fair if they have to take a real-wage pay cut.”

Last Friday, professors held an informational picket on campus. Michala said she received a flier at the protest which explained that the faculty has been cut by 18.6 percent over the past five years.

EMU faculty are part of the growing anger and resistance building up in the working class, including at Michigan Medicine in nearby Ann Arbor, where University of Michigan nurses recently voted 96 percent in favor of strike action to oppose short staffing and grueling, unsafe working conditions. EMU faculty should take a lead from the Michigan Medicine hospital workers who recently formed a hospital workers’ rank-and-file committee to prosecute the struggle and oppose the effort of the union bureaucracy to block strike action.



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