

Eastern Michigan University seeks injunction against striking faculty

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The Eastern Michigan University administration filed a motion with the Washtenaw County Circuit Court seeking an injunction to force strikers back into the classrooms on the second day of the strike by 500 instructional faculty members. While no hearing date has been set as of this writing, the administration's action is a provocation.

A warning must be issued that the complacent “wait and see” response of the EMU chapter of the American Association of University Professors (EMU-AAUP) leaves the faculty vulnerable this strikebreaking attack.

Faculty members are in a strong position, having voted 91 percent to strike, but the strike must be broadened by extending it to other educators and broader sections of the working class. This includes 6,200 Michigan Medicine nurses who voted 96 percent for strike action to demand higher wages, safe staffing levels and other improvements. Despite this, the Michigan Nurses Association and its affiliate, the University of Michigan Professional Nurse Council (UMPNC), have not set a strike date.

University of Michigan and EMU are among the largest employers in Washtenaw County.

EMU administrators claim in their motion for a temporary restraining order that the striking faculty are in violation of Michigan's Public Employee Relations Act (PERA) of 1947, which makes illegal a strike by public employees. This anti-working class measure, which was enacted the same year as the infamous Taft Hartley “slave labor bill,” is regularly invoked by public employers and union officials alike to intimidate workers and suppress their struggles.

The EMU strike began a week after the faculty contract expired on August 31. The union had extended the previous contract signed in 2015. Pushed to the

limit, faculty are striking over falling salaries, rising health care costs and the critical academic issue of shared governance.

One striker on the line, Library Science Professor and University Archivist Alexis Braun Marks, told the WSWs, “Under [the university's] terms, many of my colleagues would have to get second jobs.” Like nurses and teachers, around the country and internationally, faculty at EMU and other universities and colleges are in a fight for their professional lives.

Also like nurses and teachers, college and university faculty are fighting for those they serve. “We're concerned about the health of the university,” said Film Studies Professor Deron Overpeck. “Yes, this involves our compensation, but it also involves the welfare of our students.”

Disavowing any role in provoking the strike, the university claims, “This strike is causing and will cause EMU permanent and irreparable injuries for which there is no adequate remedy at laws [sic].” University Vice President for Communications Walter Kraft admitted more than he intended, however, when he said, “The unresolved economic and health care issues at the bargaining table that caused the faculty to walk out are best resolved by continued negotiations.”

Such statements, however, did not prevent the university from going to the courts and threatening strikers with fines and worse.

The AAUP responded by saying the strike “will be settled at the bargaining table, not in the courtroom.” By its actions, however, management has demonstrated it has no intention of backing down.

Matt Kirkpatrick, leader of the negotiating team, told the *World Socialist Web Site* on Wednesday, “We made a counter-proposal Saturday, but there's been no reply.”

Film Studies Professor Overpeck said, “We have made sizable movement in their direction on compensation. They have done nothing. It might not meet the legal definition of bad faith bargaining, but it’s certainly dishonest bargaining.”

Indeed, union negotiators have made sizable movement in the university’s direction. While sacrificing faculty’s living standards, such retreats only encourage management to double down.

For example, the University has proposed an average 6.2 percent salary increase (\$5,600) in the first year of a new contract and a total increase of 15.2 percent over the term of a five-year contract. With the current rate of inflation hovering between 8.5 and 9 percent, and with faculty paying increased out-of-pocket health costs, staff will suffer a de facto cut in real wages.

The union’s counteroffer on compensation is merely an additional \$3,200 initial base pay increase. That is, the union is asking only that faculty salaries barely keep pace with inflation for the first year of the contract. Otherwise, it is accepting the pittance the university administration is offering.

The EMU-AAUP was forced into this strike not only by the intransigence of the administration but by the righteous anger of the rank-and-file membership. But what kind of fight is the union waging? While its membership is energetically manning the picket lines, its negotiations have been a series of concessions.

In considering their rising health care expenses, it is critical for faculty, and all workers, to recognize that they are not simply contending with their employer but both big business parties and the capitalist profit system they defend.

In 2012, under Republican Governor Rick Snyder, Michigan enacted the Publicly Funded Health Insurance Contribution Act. The law limits the amount a public employer can pay toward employee medical benefit plans. Under this law, employers can either place a dollar cap on payments or institute an 80-20 cost-sharing model, with the employer covering 80 percent of the cost of the plan and leaving the employee responsible for the rest. This law has been kept in place under Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer.

If this struggle is to be won, faculty should form a rank-and-file strike committee to outline the real demands of the struggle, link up with lecturers and other campus employees to prepare a broader strike in

defense of wages and health care rights on campus. This committee should also mobilize students in support of the strike, inform them of the critical issues at stake in the strike and call for solidarity actions, including boycotting classes until the strike is won.

The rank-and-file strike committee would also appeal directly to Michigan Medicine nurses and service workers in the area who are also in the process of striking or authorizing strikes.



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