

American University administration stonewalling contract signing after staff union had declared contract “ratified”

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American University management has stonewalled the contract ratification process for hundreds of campus workers, seeking to draw out and ignore the tentative agreement [TA] which was signed by the Academic Affairs Staff Union at American University (AU) last month.

On Monday, October 3, the staff union posted to its social media feed that “we are still waiting” for the university to complete the signing process. The post called for workers to rally on the campus’s lawn on Wednesday, October 5.

About 550 workers of the AU Staff Union, members of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 500, took part in a five-day walkout on August 22–26 after failed negotiations on a new contract.

Workers demand pay raises keeping up with inflation, an end to punitive work evaluations, and an end to a tier system which punished senior workers, pitting them against newer hires.

On September 16, the AU staff union announced on Twitter that a contract was “ratified” and emphatically declared “we have a contract.” In fact, while workers had signed the TA, AU had not. “We have an agreement, are they [AU] going to honor it?” asked one worker rhetorically in comments to the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The strike threatened to disrupt the university’s school year, coming, as the Democratic Party-governed District of Columbia was preparing to send students back to unsafe schools, setting the stage for yet another fall-winter COVID surge.

Staff workers encountered resistance, however, not only from the administration, but from their own union, SEIU Local 500. The organization called off the strike

while claiming that a tentative agreement had been signed. In allowing workers to go back without the contract signed by both parties, the SEIU violated the basic principle: no contract, no work.

In an article published two days after the end of the strike, the WSWS wrote, “AU workers should be under no illusions that their struggle has concluded. ... It is possible that the SEIU called off the strike with no actual agreement in place, only the school’s promise of further negotiations.”

This warning has been fully confirmed. Not only has the university resorted to deceitful methods against the staff workers, but according to those in touch with the WSWS, it has sought to alter the language of the document.

“Yesterday we received a letter from the office of Human Resources stating that the administration was ‘revising language to ‘ensure accuracy,’” a worker said. “They shouldn’t be changing language that we already agreed to!” Indeed, if the language is still being altered, then there is no agreed-upon contract; workers have been misled by their local representatives.

The university staff have immense support within the community. The strike was warmly received by rising freshmen students, who marched alongside staff on August 26.

Throughout the strike, the SEIU kept the striking workers separate from other workers, including the Adjunct Union and Grad Workers Union, also represented by Local 500. As one sophomore student stated, “You can imagine how impactful a strike of all the workers would be ... Graduate students teach full sections of classes. Lab sessions would be closed.”

The striking workers were up against the Democratic

Party-controlled school, whose president, Sylvia M. Burwell, was a former member of the Democratic Clinton and Obama administrations. Its Board of Trustees is made up of well-connected Democratic Party operatives and Wall Street representatives.

“They have the money,” declared a campus worker in response to claims that the school had none. According to a *Best Colleges* published in fall 2021, “After three rounds of [pandemic bailout] funding, the largest federal investment ever in higher education now totals more than \$76 billion.” The publication states that “Half of those funds must go to students, but there are still billions more that can be spent with few strings attached.”

In other words, at least *half* of the “largest federal investment ever in higher education” is sloshing around in school balance sheets, if it hasn’t been spent already to inflate the bank accounts of the wealthiest investors.

The SEIU chose to appeal to the Democratic Party during the strike, rather than the working class. It invited a who’s who of local and aspiring politicians to visit the pickets in faux “solidarity.” In the end, these forces all combined to hoodwink workers into calling off their strike, declaring a great victory had been won while the campus had committed to nothing.

Workers at AU must link up together and demand a full-campus strike until a contract which meets their demands is met.

But this is precisely what the union wants to avoid. The SEIU, whose president Mary Kay Henry was called “the most influential union voice within the White House” by *Washingtonian* magazine, is more interested in maintaining its affiliation with the Democratic Party and its business allies than it is in conducting the kind of struggle necessary to win real gains for workers.



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