

City Colleges of Chicago faculty union sets November 2 strike date

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27 October 2022

The Cook County College Teachers Union (CCCTU) announced on Tuesday that faculty and staff at the City Colleges of Chicago (CCC) would go on strike November 2 in the absence of an agreement. CCC workers are determined to fight against the community college system's austerity proposal and for better conditions and supports for students. But this requires that educators begin to organize themselves independently of the union, which is equally determined to sell them out to the administration and Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot in order to preserve its seat at the table.

Although the CCCTU and CCC administration have been negotiating since October of last year, the two contracts for CCC faculty and professional staff, numbering around 1,500 workers, expired in July without any agreement with the college administration, led by Chancellor Juan Salgado, rejecting the union's proposals. On October 6, the union held a strike authorization vote, with 92 percent of 1,208 members voting in favor.

One of the central issues in the contract fight is the question of pay, with anger over inflation, that is now over 8 percent, reaching a boiling point. Both the union and the college administration, whose board is appointed by Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot, are keeping workers in the dark over the progress of negotiations and any specific proposals that are on the table. However, it is clear that the administration is proposing grossly inadequate pay rises, with CCCTU president Tony Johnston noting, "A 3% pay increase might have been fine four years ago, but with today's inflation, they need something better that will allow them to not just survive, but to live comfortably."

Faculty and staff are also pushing for lower class sizes and increased academic support personnel,

including lab assistants. Additionally, workers want the college system to allow more possibilities for remote work, as current policies require tutors and other faculty and staff offering online support to work from their college campuses. Workers are also looking for contract language that prevents their right to work remotely being arbitrarily rescinded by supervisors.

Workers also want CCC to do more to combat the downturn in enrollment, which has seen the college system's headcount enrollment fall from 43,511 to 30,904 from the spring 2018 semester to the spring of 2022, a decline of 38.4 percent. Even before the pandemic, enrollment at CCC had been plummeting, in part due to the college system's "Reinvention" initiative. Under that initiative, begun under former Mayor Rahm Emanuel, academic programs throughout the seven-college system were consolidated into one campus each, forcing students to travel great distances across the city to attend specific programs.

On July 1, CCCTU announced its City Colleges for the Common Good proposal, which included calls for expanded support and wraparound services for students. The union says the proposal would address enrollment issues for "students who are still living in chaos" due to the pandemic.

Although CCCTU leaders have set a strike date, union leaders are no doubt hoping to avoid a strike entirely, with Johnston noting, "We don't want to strike, and we know students don't want to see us strike, but we're willing to strike if we need to." Union chief of staff Kaitlyn Skoirchet said, "It's possible we may also negotiate this weekend," and added, "Our team has said that we will meet as often as possible to reach a deal before our November 2nd strike date."

However, the college administration, backed by Lightfoot, has been intransigent in rejecting the union's

demands, which are themselves entirely inadequate to meet the needs of workers and students alike. Johnston said after the strike authorization vote, “They have rejected almost all of our proposals, which has put us in a position of bargaining against ourselves because they haven’t offered counter-proposals up to this point.”

Indeed, after the strike authorization vote, which led to state-mandated mediation sessions between the union and CCC, Johnston said that negotiations on pay increases were headed “in the right direction.”

The union seems to be carrying out a replay of the agreement reached in early 2019, which came less than a week after the union held a strike authorization vote supported by similar percentages of workers. The CCCTU is extremely close to the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), and is even headquartered in the CTU’s office building. It is entirely possible that the administration and union could come to an agreement on a sellout by agreeing to portions of the City Colleges for the Common Good Proposal.

Although the CTU hails the 2019 Chicago teachers strike as a great victory due to its incorporation of so-called “bargaining for the common good elements,” the reality was that it was a sellout, which resulted in lost pay for strikers. At the same time, none of the wraparound services or agreements to hire nurses have been fulfilled in any meaningful way.

Neither CTU nor the CCCTU have fought back against the ending of COVID-19 mitigation requirements in schools, which have ended entirely for the higher education sector in Illinois. Both unions have proven themselves to be integral to suppressing the class struggle in the city, and are looking to be given even more responsibility for maintaining political stability.

CTU political director Brandon Johnson, who also serves as a Cook County commissioner, announced today that he will be officially joining the race for Chicago mayor, and has already received the CTU’s endorsement.

The only way to advance the fight for adequate pay increases and real improvements in learning conditions is for CCC workers to take the fight out of the hands of the CCCTU leaders and form rank-and-file committees. These committees must carry out full oversight of negotiations and prepare for strike action to meet educators’ basic demands, including above inflation

pay raises, lower classes sizes and the hiring of adequate support personnel.



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