

# Faculty at University of Illinois at Chicago to strike over pay and support for student mental health

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Negotiations between the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) and UIC United Faculty (UICUF) continue to be deadlocked over the question of pay raises and resources to address student mental health issues. Following what had previously been the final scheduled bargaining session on January 12, negotiators for the union and university administration have agreed to sit down for an additional meeting Monday to try to work out a deal to avert a strike set to begin on Tuesday, January 17.

The 900 members of UIC United Faculty, which includes full-time tenure track (TT) and non-tenure track (NTT) faculty, except for those in the colleges of medicine, law, dentistry and pharmacy, have been working without contracts since August. The results of a mid-November strike vote indicated overwhelming support for the action. Out of 77 percent of faculty voting, 97 percent voted to strike.

The issue of pay has become a major issue for UIC faculty as a result of years of essentially stagnant wages under previous contracts. The last deal, which was in force from 2018 through 2022, included a yearly increase of only 2 percent to the overall faculty salary pool. This sum was to be distributed on the basis of “merit,” leading to situations in which some faculty received much higher raises than others. To make up for the resulting disparities, a meagre 2 percent was added to address “compression and equity” issues.

Due to recent inflation, which saw year-over-year jumps of 4.7 percent and 8 percent in 2021 and 2022, many faculty have effectively had their pay raises from the last contract completely reversed. The university is well aware that faculty pay has declined, particularly when compared to other institutions. The University of Illinois’ fiscal year 2023 budget request to the state noted that its analyses of

faculty salaries “reveal that each of our three universities lags its peers in terms of faculty salary.”

Despite this, the university has offered increases to the merit and compression/equity pools of only 5 percent in the first year and 3.5 percent for the second year, which will not make up the ground lost in previous years. The university administration is also offering faculty earning less than \$70,000 per year a one-time payment of \$3,000 and \$1,500 to those earning more than that.

Although the university had originally proposed a four-year contract, according to the union, the administration is now seeking a shorter two-year deal. UICUF originally proposed increases in the salary pools amounting to 7 percent and 8 percent in the first two years, still completely inadequate to make up for years of flat salaries and inflation. The union also sought a \$3,000 per year across-the-board permanent increase in salary for all faculty.

Another sticking point on pay relates to minimum salaries, with the union proposing \$61,875 per year for NTT faculty and \$76,000 for TT faculty, compared to the administration’s proposal of \$52,000 and \$67,600, respectively. Notably, as part of a long-standing trend in higher education of cutting funding for tenure-track faculty, NTT faculty members comprise around half the total.

These minimum salaries amount to nearly poverty wages in the expensive Chicago region. This is especially true for the many faculty who have accrued large student loans during their advanced educations. These minimums are also lower than the minimum salaries for faculty at the City Colleges of Chicago (CCC) and Chicago Public Schools (CPS). On December 7, UIC faculty union officials acknowledged that in a bid to settle the contract, “We made significant concessions, including a step down

in our salary demands.”

The university administration, however, has remained intransigent. The university’s Board of Trustees, all of whom have been appointed by billionaire Democratic Governor JB Pritzker or his Republican billionaire predecessor Bruce Rauner, represents the interests of the state’s largest corporations and financial aristocracy. They are acting fully in accord with the strategy outlined by the US Federal Reserve to smother wage growth under the guise of fighting inflation and remaining within the austerity limits of the university’s budget.

Faculty are also facing increased workloads because they are helping students cope with mental health issues. They are seeking “a minimum level of mental health care” for students, as well as free screenings for mental health and neuropsychological conditions on par with those offered at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Michael Pasek, a UIC psychology professor, noted on Twitter, “I surveyed my students on the first day of class and asked what they perceived as the biggest challenges in need of intervention. Almost all listed mental health. It’s no wonder faculty @thisisUIC are about to strike over students’ mental health resources.”

Although it is unquestionably true that resources must be devoted to student mental health, the manner in which this issue has risen to the top of news reports on the strike deadline and in statements from members of the union’s bargaining committee suggests it is being used to serve as the basis for further concessions on wages. One of the characteristics of these “bargaining for the common good” proposals in recent years has been their open-ended nature, which commit management to very little or even nothing, but allow the union to describe its concessions as a “win.”

The reality is that mental health issues have exploded among youth and students since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, with diagnoses of depression reportedly tripling. A University of Calgary study of 80,000 youth across the globe showed rates of anxiety and depression doubling since 2020.

Under these conditions, it is not possible for “normal” learning to take place, especially as the causes of so many of these mental health issues remain unaddressed. Massive resources—well beyond the union’s proposals—are certainly needed to assist students. Most importantly, young people need to have hope in a decent future, and this is only possible through a fight against the continued spread of the pandemic, economic insecurity

and the danger of a nuclear armageddon. In every case, however, the Democratic Party machine, with which the unions are allied, is pursuing policies that are destroying the futures of young people.

Faculty at UIC went on strike for the first time in 2014 in order to get an initial contract, which was finally concluded in 2015. The contract the union accepted following a two-day strike included a meagre 1 percent per year increase for compression and equity raises and only committed the university to merit pay raises equivalent to what the university budgeted for other staff. Additionally, it established a paltry \$42,000 minimum salary for NTT faculty, barely above poverty wages for Chicago.

The contract that expired in August of last year was negotiated in April 2019, nearly a full academic year after the previous one had expired. That sellout deal was agreed to one day before faculty were set to strike, despite deep support for a strike among students and wider layers of workers.

An eight-day strike by UIC graduate students was shut down by the Graduate Employees Organization (GEO), which, like UICUF, is an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). Although the graduate students won widespread sympathy for their struggle, the GEO agreed to a contract that would see minimum pay rise to only a little over \$24,000 by the end of the contract, and would amount to a cut in real income when inflation is taken into account.

In order to prevent yet another concessions-laden sellout deal, UIC faculty must take control of the negotiations and form a rank-and-file committee to conduct the strike independently of the AFT and other union bureaucrats.

A fight against the university administration and board requires mobilizing UIC staff, undergraduates and graduate students, as well as faculty in the professional schools, to shut down the campus and appeal to Chicago teachers, autoworkers, rail and logistics workers and others to support their struggle. UIC faculty interested in forming a rank-and-file committee can contact the WSWS immediately for assistance.



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