

“I want them to keep on fighting!”: University of Illinois Chicago faculty begin strike with widespread student support

George Marlowe, Andy Thompson
18 January 2023

Are you an educator or student at UIC? We want to hear from you. Fill out the form at the end to tell us what your conditions are like and what teachers and students should be fighting for.

Hundreds of faculty at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) went on strike Tuesday demanding higher pay, better working conditions and support for mental health for students.

The walkout by UIC faculty is part of a growing strike movement among workers globally against the impact of inflation and the cost-of-living crisis, with an Oxfam report recently describing “an explosion of inequality” in the midst of the pandemic. The rebellion of UIC faculty follows a spate of strikes in higher education in the past few months, including the six-week strike of 48,000 University of California academic workers late last year and the strike of 1,600 part-time faculty at The New School in New York City.

A striking non-tenure track faculty member told the *World Socialist Web Site* Tuesday, “We’re striking for higher minimum salary increases for non-tenure track and tenure track and mental health support for students. A lot of the first-year students are taught by non-tenure track positions, and it’s important we’re paid fairly. For non-tenure track, there’s the reappointment notification, so that people don’t know a month before classes start that they may not have a job next year.”

He added, “I’m pretty new to the university. I’ve been here for two years. I really respect the faculty that have been through the pandemic. They taught all the classes online and still keep teaching and keep the university going. There was little credit given to them. Enrollment stayed high at UIC, but now we’re being offered salary increases that don’t keep up with inflation. Salary ranges should keep up with changing times.”

Faculty and graduate workers at UIC have faced more than a decade of wage stagnation, with minimal salary increases during years of austerity and attacks on higher education following the 2008-2009 financial crisis, including by former billionaire Republican Governor Bruce Rauner and under the current billionaire Democratic Governor JB Pritzker. While billions are shelled out for war spending by the Biden administration and both parties, massive cuts are being

prepared in education, health care and essential social services.

In their strike, UIC faculty also face the Democratic Party-controlled University of Illinois Board of Trustees, overseen by Pritzker, who like many Illinois billionaires saw his wealth increase during the pandemic.

The latest proposal by the UIC administration is for a four-year contract with a minimum salary of \$58,405 for non-tenured faculty and \$70,305 for tenured-track faculty, along with a one-time bonus of \$4,000. The UIC United Faculty (UICUF), an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), is proposing a minimum salary of \$61,000 for non-tenured faculty and \$77,000 for tenured faculty, along with a \$3,000 base salary increase.

“Management has offered over four years a total of 17 percent, which averages to 4.2 percent, far below inflation,” a faculty member on strike said. She added, “A lot of senior faculty have also had years of compression,” i.e., the same or lower pay than their newly hired colleagues. The union is calling for an 18 percent pay increase over three years, averaging around 6 percent annually.

But both the university’s and the UICUF’s pay proposals are below the rate of inflation, which averaged over 6.5 percent the past year and topped 9 percent during the summer. Previous contracts in 2015 and 2019 also ended in concessions for faculty, while UIC graduate student workers continue to work for poverty wages of \$20,000 despite two recent strikes. Although UIC has claimed there is insufficient money to meet the demands of grad students and academic workers, the university administration has overseen high tuition costs and record donations—not to mention the bumper profits reaped in recent years by Chicago-based corporations and investment firms.

At a rally at noon, striking faculty received wide support from students. But the rally was also an occasion for demagogic speeches by union officials who have a record of betraying educators. AFT President Randi Weingarten, who has made between \$400,000-500,000 for many years, spoke at the rally, along with President Stacy Davis-Gates of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU). Weingarten has sold out and shut down

innumerable strikes of teachers and educators, and the CTU has imposed austerity contracts on teachers, including sending teachers and students into unsafe classrooms at the height of the Omicron surge.

Striking UIC faculty have also won support among the student body, campus staff and graduate workers. Undergraduate students reported that many of their classes were canceled on Tuesday, while some were administered by graduate worker teacher assistants.

“I was at bargaining yesterday, and a group of students showed up as well, about five to 10,” another faculty member said, speaking on the struggles students face as well. “They had signs of support, with over 200 faculty there too. All of us have different stories, but we have students who go through mental health crises. Yesterday, there was a different student at the bargaining: For four years as a student at UIC, she could never get an appointment at the counseling center, even during the pandemic.

“Students have gone through a lot,” she added. “We try to give students grace and support the students, but we’re not trained on mental health issues.”

An English Department chair also spoke out in support of the strike, despite not being in the union any more. “Faculty and staff working conditions are student learning conditions,” he said. “That’s the beginning and end. All the people I know who are devoted teachers are committed to not seeing any deterioration in our students’ learning conditions, and sometimes that means conflict with management and sometimes that means striking.

“I’ve stopped being in the union formally, but I want my faculty to be remunerated for the astonishing work they do. The faculty are making minimum pay. And the austerity years were not great. They give students world-class education, regardless of background. These are the people on the frontline of that. We should pay educators a living wage.”

Students also spoke out in support of the strike. Ryan, an undergraduate, said, “I agree with the strike because generally I agree with workers’ rights. I believe that it is almost always true that an employee makes more for their employer than they receive in pay. It is within the rights of the workers to cease working, especially when the employer takes them for granted.”

Ryan added, “I don’t know enough about the board of trustees to form an educated opinion about it, but I do know that billionaires rarely have the little guy in mind when they make their decisions, especially with how the last two governors of Illinois were billionaires. It was a Democrat and a Republican, the only bipartisanship I’ve seen in my lifetime is to fight against workers’ rights.

“My largest frustration rests with running an academic organization like a business to turn a profit. I am fairly certain that the university didn’t open with their best offer. This leads me to believe they are choosing to play chicken with their

students and teachers only for money. I support the teachers because I believe they have the students at heart and in mind in a way that the administration simply doesn’t.”

Karl, a biology student, said, “The professors have a point. The starting salary for them is only \$50,000, and they all have PhDs. They are very highly educated.” Speaking to the demand for more student mental health resources, he added, “Well after COVID a lot of students are struggling financially. There is a lot of pressure on us to deal with that and college itself is hard.”

Speaking to the importance of the strike, he concluded, “I think the professors should keep at it because sometimes it’s hard to fight for the things you believe in, and I think they are right about this one.”

Zac, a political science student, added, “I am fully in support of the strike. At UIUC they have more mental health resources, and the professors are trying to get the same thing for us here. And when it comes to wages, the cost of living in Chicago is skyrocketing. The demand is just for an increase from \$50,000 to \$60,000 which isn’t all that much but can help with rent and groceries.”

“Many of our professors have tons of debt and we are getting saddled with it too. My dad actually went to UIC too in the 70s, and the total cost of his education is about half of what I pay in just one semester.”

“I think the strike is needed,” said Noor-ulayn, a second year student. “It’s vital for students to get a quality education when teachers do not have fair working conditions. It has a direct impact on us.”

“Education is a right, not a luxury,” she said. “I want them to keep on fighting! We are the next generation and we want to be set up with the best world possible, and with this strike they are helping us with that.”

UIC faculty have enormous support among students and workers. A serious struggle to win their demands can only be mounted by building a rank-and-file strike committee to unite students, graduate workers, and campus workers to shut the campus down and fight for significantly higher pay increases, protection from inflation, a massive infusion of funding in public education, and other demands to meet the needs of both educators and students.

Moreover, such a struggle should be linked up with teachers, autoworkers, logistics workers and other sections of the working class throughout the Chicago region and more broadly to mount a working class counteroffensive against the cost of living crisis.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact