

Ratified UIC faculty contract fails to address faculty and students' needs

Alexander Fangmann
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On February 7, the faculty union at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) announced the ratification of a four year contract covering full-time tenured/tenure-track (TT) and non-tenure-track (NTT) faculty. Though touted as a win by the unions, the university committed itself to little more than the equivalent of pocket change for improving student mental health, while the purported wage gains for faculty will be quickly eroded by inflation.

The UIC United Faculty (UICUF) said 63 percent of its roughly 940 members voted, with 99 percent voting in favor. WBEZ's Lisa Philip reported on Twitter that 593 faculty voted for the deal, with three voting against.

The vote, however, was only carried out after the union shut down the strike after four days of canceled classes, in order to to present the contract as a *fait accompli* to faculty.

The union settled for wage increases that will leave many faculty still struggling and worse off by the time it expires. While minimum salary for NTT and TT faculty were increased to \$60,000 and \$71,500, respectively, representing a 20 percent increase for NTT faculty and 15.4 percent for TT faculty, those salaries still fall below the median income for the Chicago area. Many faculty are also burdened by high levels of student loans, making it nearly impossible for many to afford to buy a home or have children.

Although the union has touted faculty raise "pools" of 20 percent, the only guaranteed raise any faculty members will receive is a \$2,500 increase to base salary, calculated to be equal to a 2.25 percent increase in total university expenditure on faculty salaries. All the rest of the salary increases are allocated in highly opaque ways on the basis of "merit" and "compression and equity."

According to UICUF, a university memo on merit pay reads: "Merit pay is a salary adjustment awarded to employees as recognition of their contribution towards meeting the goals and objectives of the department, college and university during the previous year." In other words, whether someone qualifies for a merit increase can vary widely across the university, and it is largely up to those individual campus departments to decide how to dole out the money set aside for this purpose. The pool of money set aside for these merit increases per year are 3.5 percent, 3 percent, 2.5 percent and 3 percent.

Additionally, another pool of money is set aside for raises to address the issue of wage "compression." Wage compression is a phenomenon that especially affects mid-career faculty, and it occurs when, as a result of low raises, their salaries end up stagnating and ending up close to that of newly-hired faculty. Money to address compression is limited to 1 percent in the first year, 1.75 percent in the second year, 1.5 percent in the third year, and 1.5 percent in the fourth.

However, faculty experiencing compression are not guaranteed raises. According to the agreement, decisions are up to the "sole discretion of the dean following consultation with the department heads." In other words, faculty could get absolutely nothing if their administrators would prefer to award that money to someone else.

Faculty have no recourse to appeal these decisions on pay. As the contract states, "Because any determination as to any salary increase is at the department's or unit's sole discretion, such determination shall not be grievable under the Grievance and Arbitration article of this agreement."

Indeed, the agreement spells out in clear detail that very little in the way of raises is guaranteed. It states,

“Salaries of individual members of the bargaining unit as adjusted by the application of the terms above, shall be established in accordance with campus and applicable academic unit policies and practices; and for those years, individual bargaining unit members may receive a salary increase that is less than, equivalent to, or greater than the increment set forth” for each year.

Even if a faculty member were to receive merit and equity/compression pay increases equivalent to the “increment set forth,” they would likely see an effective pay cut when taking inflation into account. Inflation, using Consumer Price Index (CPI) data, was 8 percent in 2022, more than the total raise pool of 6.75 percent for the first year of the agreement. Annualized inflation for 2023 is currently at 6.4 percent for 2023, more than the 4.75 percent pool for year 2. Inflation of just 1.1 percent in 2024 would wipe out any gains from raises for the first three years of the deal, and were it any higher, it is likely that any inflation in 2025 would eat away all the gains and more.

This is especially true as inflation is likely to remain high for some time as a result of the massive asset bubble created by the pumping of trillions of dollars into the financial markets. Moreover, it is highly likely that health care costs, which have continued to skyrocket, will be passed along to UIC faculty, further cutting their pay over the course of the contract.

Perhaps the most illusory of the “wins” is on the question of student mental health. After making this question a centerpiece of the union’s four day strike, UICUF agreed to leave it out of the contract, settling for a commitment by the university to allocate a mere \$4.5 million over six years to improve mental health resources, a mere \$750,000 per year for a school with 33,000 students. By way of contrast, the top 10 administrators at UIC alone are paid over \$6 million per year collectively.

Colleges and universities faculties are highly unequal, with “star” faculty often earning hundreds of thousands of dollars per year, while the vast majority of faculty work for wages far closer to the poverty pay of adjunct faculty and graduate students. These highly exploitative institutions are keenly aware that many faculty are unlikely to be able to get another position within the academy, as jobs are few and far between, and highly competitive. This discourages faculty from speaking out too loudly about their conditions, as the

consequence of speaking out could be career-ending.

The ruthlessness of the universities can be seen very clearly in the strike by Temple University graduate students. There the university rescinded health care and tuition remission for 750 striking graduate students, even sending them tuition bills. At the University of California (UC), university officials began a vindictive campaign to claw back wages the university claimed were mistakenly paid to striking workers.

But as with graduate students at Temple and UC, the question is not the ruthlessness of the universities or the willingness of academic workers, including faculty, to fight. Rather, the experience at UIC points to the need to build new organizations, democratically controlled by the rank-and-file, as well as the need to fight for socialism and against the austerity and warmongering of the Democratic Party.



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