

Chicago State University faculty and staff strike against low pay and high workloads

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We want to hear from students, faculty and staff at Chicago State University: Fill out the form below to tell us what you think about the strike and conditions on campus.

More than 160 faculty and staff at Chicago State University (CSU) went on strike Monday against low pay and high workloads, as administrators remained firm in their resolve to make workers pay for decades of budget cuts at public universities throughout the state.

The action by faculty and staff at the campus based on Chicago's South Side has occurred amid a wave of strikes by faculty and graduate students throughout the country, including the University of Michigan, where currently striking graduate students are facing lawsuits by a Democratic Party-led administration aimed at dragging them back into the classroom.

CSU faculty and staff are members of the University Professionals of Illinois (UPI) Local 4100, which is affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). A March strike vote was overwhelmingly supported by 98 percent of voting faculty. They have been working without a contract since August of last year.

Professors and other academic professionals at CSU, with an enrollment of around 2,400 students, are among the lowest paid in the state, according to data from the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE). A report from the National Education Association (NEA) found professors at Chicago State were paid an average of \$88,000 per year, \$7,000 less than the state average.

CSU's UPI chapter president Valerie Goss cited problems with retaining and attracting faculty given the low pay and high workload, asking, "How can we expect our outstanding faculty and staff to stay here and work more for less?" Goss noted, "Our workloads are

so overwhelming that there aren't enough hours in the day to get everything done."

Goss, as well as UPI President John Miller, declined to state the union's salary demands, with Miller saying, "We don't bargain in public." Goss told Inside Higher Ed that the union's overall proposal and the university's differ by about \$294,000, which is less than one half of one percent of the university's budget, and less than the yearly salary of CSU President Zaldwaynaka Scott, who made \$395,000 in fiscal year 2021, and received a 16 percent salary increase on top of that just this year.

Despite lavishing such high salaries on top administrators, the university administration is citing budget difficulties, claiming, "The union's financial demands far exceed our current economic position."

University officials have committed to keeping student services and classes running, even aiming to bring in strikebreakers to bring faculty to heel. A university statement prior to the strike threatened, "We have contingency plans in place to leverage available instruction resources to minimize the disruption to our students as much as possible."

Goss noted in response to the threat of strikebreakers, "They can actually think about and are moving towards hiring people to replace us in the classroom, but not actually putting money towards what would be a fair proposal for us."

Despite the threat of keeping classes running, Miller noted on Monday afternoon, "We just know that, at the present moment, it doesn't look like there are any classes going on on campus."

With its origins as the Cook County Normal School and then the Chicago Teachers College, run directly by the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), CSU has historically educated and trained large numbers of

Chicago public school teachers. However, over the past few decades, it has seen its enrollment decline precipitously, from nearly 10,000 in the 1990s to under 2,400 today, as a result of budget cuts and an increase in teacher education programs at other local universities, such as Northeastern Illinois University, which itself began as a branch of CSU.

Extensive budget cuts carried out as a result of the state's budget impasse under former Republican Governor Bruce Rauner saw the mass layoff of nearly a third of university employees in 2016, and the university came close to the brink of closure.

Former CPS CEO Paul Vallas was installed as chief administrative officer at the university in 2017 by the university's Rauner-aligned board to turn around the declining enrollment and graduation rates, among the lowest of all public universities in the state. Vallas lasted less than a year before being ousted by the board for using his position as a springboard to run for mayor of Chicago.

Two other public universities in Illinois are set to begin their own strikes shortly, with Eastern Illinois University faculty in Charleston set to begin a strike on Thursday, and Governors State University, in Chicago's south suburbs, looking to join them next week.

All three schools have faced pressures on enrollment and competition from other universities, which have been exacerbated by Illinois' decades-long underfunding of higher education. According to the Center for Tax and Budget Accountability (CTBA), public higher education funding in Illinois only recently reached the level appropriated in fiscal year 2000, nearly half of what the state was spending when adjusted for inflation.

Even though faculty at CSU are facing a class assault in the same manner as their counterparts at other universities, the CSU UPI leadership has concentrated on racist appeals, highlighting the impact on African American students and faculty.

Goss said at a campus rally, "Our students come from black and brown communities. I don't understand why it is that our students have to endure faculty who are being paid less than faculty at any other institution. This is not an equitable picture."

Faculty must reject the attempt by the UPI and AFT leadership to settle the strike along the same kinds of

insulting terms seen at UIC, Temple and other universities. Goss already attempted to temper expectations about the strike, saying, "For years, there's been disinvestment in higher education. We're not asking for a makeup of all this disinvestment; what we're asking for is for the gap to not continue increasing."

AFT president Randi Weingarten, who has played a prominent role in shutting down teachers' strikes across the country, including the movement against school reopenings during the pandemic, appeared at CSU on Monday. Her presence is a warning. Faculty and staff at CSU must immediately begin organizing a rank-and-file committee to take the fight out of the hands of the union leadership, who will shut it down at the earliest opportunity and on the cheapest terms.



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