Governor’s State University faculty and staff the latest US college workers to launch strike action

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Faculty and staff at Governor’s State University in suburban Chicago will begin a strike today which will last at least until the next bargaining session between the union and university administration on April 12. Staff and faculty, members of the University Professionals of Illinois union (UPI), are striking to protest abysmally low pay and increasing workloads.

GSU staff and faculty join UPI members on strike at Chicago State University and Eastern Illinois University. School workers have launched strike action at other major campuses throughout the country, including at the University of Michigan and Rutgers.

The WSWS spoke with Amy, an instructor at Governor’s State University where staff and faculty go on strike today. Although Amy’s position is not part of the UPI, she expressed solidarity with the striking faculty and staff and shares many of the same conditions.

“I’ve worked in higher education for 20 years. In Illinois, the working conditions have gotten worse over the past 12 years. There are fewer support staff at universities and those responsibilities are shifted to faculty. For example, the faculty and instructors where I currently teach at Governor’s State University have to fill out travel forms on their own if they need to travel for any part of their work. The forms get more difficult, and it cuts into instruction time. I’ve had to order books myself as an instructor.

“I know these things happen everywhere. It’s the same for Chicago State and Eastern Illinois. Faculty are taking on advising. Most students at colleges like Governor’s State University, Eastern Illinois University and Chicago State University have credits from elsewhere and the faculty must do all the research to know if the credits can be transferred, and it takes away all their teaching time. We’re also sometimes being asked to be accountable for if the students will be able to pay back their loans or not, when that should be none of our business.

“At these schools, there are a few faculty that are making close to $100,000 and when they’re included in the average, it skews the salary. I know there are some salaries that are five times higher than everyone else. They should correctly measure the outliers for salaries and determine what most are making.

“There were three years in Illinois [from 2016–2018] where no state universities got any funding. Even when we had a zero budget, the administrators kept getting raises, but not the faculty and staff.

“Illinois has the second-highest property tax rate in the US. Property tax has gone up even more than the pay rates, and so has food, insurance and health care. It’s harder to make ends meet. We are getting more work and no raises to match.”

Lauren, a student at Chicago State University, said: “I’m a student at CSU right now and they are gaslighting the students and faculty. I’m being told classes are not canceled and that the striking teachers will be replaced. I wouldn’t cross those lines, and classes are definitely not going on. You can’t just cross a picket line and tell people to come to work.

“Chicago State faculty are poorly equipped. The professors are using books that have the binding broken and pages falling out. Most of the equipment was obsolete 10 years ago. There wasn’t a working women’s bathroom on one of the floors for four months. There was soil in the sinks and it was pitch black because the lights wouldn’t turn on. Lots of things are in disrepair, but I heard the admin got 16 percent raises. They spent a lot of money on the athletic center and repaving the parking lot, but there is no money for anything else.”

She spoke to the way the University administration was trying to foment divisions between the striking staff and the students. “They’re trying to make students feel that it’s the faculty’s fault we’re not being taught. The administration is sending emails saying that CSU has some of the highest pay in the state. There’s not much information and that’s how I found your article. I wasn’t sure if there was supposed to be a strike or not.”

As at most universities and colleges across the US, students and faculty were left vulnerable to the outbreak of COVID-19. Many had not only dealt with the trauma of having family members or themselves infected, but also dealt with the sickness and deaths of fellow students and teachers without any real support, all while being told they still had to work and attend classes.

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Amy had first-hand experience when COVID-19 hit college campuses. “As a faculty, there wasn’t a lot of information on COVID and remote teaching. They didn’t pay me to buy any of the things I needed to teach remotely, I had to buy it myself. They didn’t tell us how to do remote teaching, and I think a lot of faculty made mistakes because they never had to do this before.

“If there was one student who didn’t have a strong connection, it made it grainy and scratchy for everyone, and it took us a long time to figure that out. If more than one had a bad connection, it made it untenable if they turned their cameras on, so people left their cameras off and didn’t fully participate. It could be likely that someone signs in and walks away from the computer. It was very hard on the students to figure out how to learn.

“I got COVID in 2020 before there were vaccines. They didn’t have a test yet, so I couldn’t prove to the university what I caught, but I couldn’t breathe nor sit up for five weeks. I was told to teach classes when I could barely breathe, so I conducted classes by email. My students didn’t see me. There were no spots in hospitals, so my physician told me that I shouldn’t go to the hospital. I thought I was dying because they wouldn’t be able to take care of me.

“I lost a couple students [to COVID]. You can’t imagine how difficult [it is] if you’re in a class and someone just died and you’re told to just move on. There was a lot of secrecy, because no one could reveal their vaccine status. The person sitting next to me could be against vaccination and not wearing a mask, and no one enforced any measures. Instead of warning these people or telling them to teach from home, we were all supposed to be quiet.”

Amy expressed support for the struggle of her coworkers at GSU, but had criticisms of the UPI leadership who is in control of the strike. “I’m not a union member. The dues are high and I don’t feel they’re interested in any of the things I cared about.

“They’ve been working without a contract for almost a year. Why did they wait until April to go on strike? September would have been a better time, when classes were just starting. Shouldn’t the union be reaching out to the media to let people know what’s happening to support it? Their cause will not get much traction. We’re only being offered a 1 percent raise per year.”

The UPI is actively attempting to shut down the strikes as soon as possible without winning a contract that will meet any of the staff and faculty’s demands. Its Facebook page has not reported any concrete information on picket times that would make it easy for the public to find ways to show solidarity with the workers.

The UPI striking workers have support from other higher-ed workers in the Chicago area. On Monday, the Lake Land College Faculty Association wrote a statement in support of striking workers at EIU that stated: “As it is the policy of the LLCFA to not engage in any strike-breaking activities at any institution, our membership will not cross the picket line to teach classes, fulfill other duties belonging to our siblings, or disseminate requests from EIU to identify people willing to cross the picket lines.”

But the UPI is actively isolating its members from this support. Its Facebook post on Monday called for an end to the CSU strike without showing any real progress on winning workers’ demands. The post instead asked students and staff to appeal to CSU President Zaldwaynaka Scott to end the strike, rather than appealing to workers in the area or Chicago Public Schools teachers to join solidarity actions. Scott made $395,000 in fiscal year 2021, and received a 16 percent salary increase on top of that just this year, placing her salary at nearly $500,000 per year.

On Monday, newly-elected Chicago mayor Democrat Brandon Johnson appeared at Chicago State University pickets. Johnson had key backing from Bernie Sanders and the Democratic Socialists of America. Johnson’s appearance was both a sign that the UPI and Democratic Party are working to end the strike as soon as possible and blinding workers to the real class interests involved in the strike.

Instead of isolating and dividing workers, higher-education workers need a leadership that will unite them internationally with the immense support from workers that exists for their struggle. To prevent the struggles of higher-education workers in Illinois from being sabotaged by the current union leadership, like the LAUSD strike that ended last month, higher-education workers need to form new organizations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, to fight for workers’ control over the struggle.

For educators and students concerned about the right to public education coming under attack by the corporate ruling class, the way forward is through independent struggle of the working class carried out on the basis of an international struggle against the source of these attacks, global capitalism.

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