

9,000 academic workers begin powerful joint strike at Rutgers University

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More than 9,000 academic workers at Rutgers University went on strike Monday morning, marking the latest in a wave of academic workers' struggles across the country. Workers at Rutgers, as elsewhere around the nation, are battling against low pay and lack of job security. The strike at Rutgers is the first on the campus since its founding in 1766, before the American Revolution.

Three of 12 unions representing different sections of workers at Rutgers are directly involved in the work stoppage, covering full-time faculty, part-time adjuncts, and graduate student workers in the American Association of University Professors-American Federation of Teachers (AAUP-AFT), with the latter comprising the largest share of the 9,000 workers on strike.

The walkout at Rutgers coincides with the strike of 1,300 graduate students at the University of Michigan, who are continuing their walkout Tuesday following a court ruling denying the university's request for an injunction to shut down the strike. In addition, academic workers at three Chicago-area colleges are now also on strike.

The current walkouts build on a surge of academic workers' struggles in recent years, including the 50,000-strong strike in the University of California system last semester and walkouts at Columbia, New York University, the New School, Temple, and Eastern Michigan University, to name a few.

The logic of these struggles is towards unified action across campus and state lines, but this requires the building of rank-and-file committees to assert the independent interests of the workers themselves. The role of the union bureaucracies is to subordinate workers to the Democratic Party and American imperialism, a process already on display in the strike

at Rutgers, which was only called due to enormous pressure from the rank and file.

In response to the powerful demonstration of strength by workers at Rutgers, which shut down classes and research across the three campuses in New Brunswick, Newark and Camden, New Jersey's Democratic Governor Phil Murphy immediately pressed for an end to the strike. On Monday, Murphy issued a statement calling for "the University and union bargaining committees to meet in my office tomorrow to have a productive dialogue." The threat of injunction hangs over the strike, with the university pledging to hold off on pursuing a court-ordered return to work until negotiations overseen by the governor conclude.

In a clear indication of the unions' support for the Democrats, Rebecca Givan, president of Rutgers AAUP-AFT, applauded the governor's intervention, adding, "We hope he continues to be a positive influence on the Rutgers administration."

At Rutgers, workers have been without a contract for nearly a year. The last pay bump came in July 2021, when they received a paltry 2.5 percent increase. In the nearly two years since, runaway inflation has had a crushing impact on living standards, especially for low-paid and contingent adjunct faculty and graduate students.

Housing costs are a particular flash point. In New Brunswick, home to the main Rutgers campus, one-bedroom apartments average \$2,477, according to Rent.com. For graduate students making \$30,000 a year or part-time lecturers who do not know if they will have a job from one semester to the next, providing basic necessities is a constant struggle.

As is the case in Michigan, Illinois, and at campuses across the country, the university administration is insisting that workers continue to accept declining

living standards. The last offer from the university was an insulting 3 percent pay increase, representing a massive pay cut after inflation. AAUP-AFT countered with demands of just 4.25 to 5 percent annual wage increases—still well below inflation—for full-time faculty, as well as a minimum salary of just \$37,150 for graduate students and additional job security measures.

On the picket line in New Brunswick Monday, Rutgers professor David Fresko told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “We’re fighting for the rights of all the faculty at the university, especially part-time laborers, commonly known as adjuncts. They teach a disproportionate number of classes, and they’re not paid a proper living wage. So the entire faculty here—tenure track faculty, non-tenure track faculty, full-time, part-time—are coming together to fight for a basic standard of living all people deserve.”

Referencing the wave of academic workers’ struggles, Fresko added, “I think we’re experiencing a major efflorescence in the labor movement, especially within higher education, where working conditions have reached a critical crisis point where you now have workers demanding what they deserve. You see this at Northwestern University, Temple University, the New School, and well beyond and I think that this is not something that is cresting but something that is going to increase.”

The mounting strike wave in academia is a direct response to the inflationary spiral and cost of living crisis profoundly exacerbated by the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. These profound world events deepened long-term processes in higher education, where the commodification of academic labor has increasingly relied upon highly exploited adjunct and graduate students while shrinking the availability of tenure-track professorships. This has been combined with the explosion of student debt and the high price of education. At Rutgers, in-state tuition with room and board now costs over \$30,000 for undergraduates. This is considered “affordable” compared to many other institutions.

Another striking professor, who asked to remain anonymous, discussed the situation confronting aspiring academic workers. “Grad students are questioning how good things are. It’s harder and harder to get tenure. I don’t think the future looks bright for higher education in general,” he said. “You can easily

get into a lot of debt by the end of your degree. Frankly, if you have debt, it’s almost impossible to think about grad school.”

In contrast to the dire situation facing many academic workers, Rutgers lavishes its top administrators and sports coaches with outrageous luxury. Jonathan Holloway, the president of Rutgers, garnered nearly \$1.2 million during his first year at the university in 2020, plus a house and a car. Last year, Rutgers basketball coach Steve Pikiell received a four-year, \$16 million contract. The inequality within Rutgers is far from unique. It mirrors the grotesque levels of inequality more broadly in American society, which starves public education for funding while mobilizing virtually unlimited resources for war.

The strike at Rutgers is finding widespread support. Striking faculty and graduate students were joined Monday on the picket line by students and other supporters, who also spoke to the WSWS.

Dimitri, an undergraduate studying math, remarked, “My sister is a grad student here at Rutgers. I’m supporting the strike because I think that graduate workers interested in an academic career should have a chance at surviving while they’re studying here. If you think of teaching as a noble profession, then why shouldn’t those pursuing that profession be given the money to do that?”

An undergraduate studying linguistics said, “It’s really important for everybody to show up. I think undergraduates are really passionate about this too. Everybody’s really feeling frustrated with the administration and the way graduate students and adjuncts have been treated here at this university and countless other universities.”



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