

Rutgers University strike continues as governor, union bureaucracy aim to shut it down

Erik Schreiber
11 April 2023

The strike of more than 9,000 full-time faculty, part-time adjuncts and graduate student workers at Rutgers University in New Jersey continued for a second day on Tuesday. With the beginning of a strike by faculty and staff at Governor's State University in suburban Chicago on Tuesday and the continuation of strikes by faculty and staff at Chicago State University and Eastern Illinois University, as well as 1,300 graduate students at the University of Michigan, there are now five academic workers' strikes taking place simultaneously across three US states.

The Rutgers workers' main demands are better pay, especially for adjunct professors who teach 30 percent of the university's undergraduate classes, as well as equal access to health care and improved working conditions.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with several striking academic workers at pickets on Tuesday.

A full-time, non-tenure track assistant teaching professor in the math department, who wished to remain anonymous, told the WSWS, "It's egregious that the adjunct lecturers here, the part-time lecturers, don't have health care. There are many adjuncts in my department who have been here for 20 years without health care. That's horrible."

Control over course schedules and class sizes are among the workers' demands. "I've been given classes where I have to learn the subject in 72 hours so I can teach it. I'd like more control over that," said the assistant teaching professor.

Anthony, a writing instructor, commented, "What motivates me [to fight] is the unfair difference between part-timers and full-timers. I used to be a part-timer, so I have experienced this: far less pay for the same work. It's like a caste system, which is really problematic. And then, even as a full-timer, I find myself having to look for a

second job this fall just to make ends meet. We live in a very expensive part of the country." He added that the current level of inequality was "obscene."

Anthony added, "I didn't know much about the current situation for graduate workers here at Rutgers until yesterday at the rally, when they spoke about how little they get paid, considering the amount of work they do for the university—teaching, research—on top of their own research work. I know what it's like to try to make a living while working on getting your degree. And what they're asking for is not even that much, it's not even a living wage. It's brutal, it's exploitation of labor. It's appalling: people with advanced degrees who can't even make a living."

Meredith McGill, chair of the English Department, told the WSWS, "One of the things that's striking about the Rutgers strike is the unity across ranks." She cited the fact that faculty, part-time lecturers and graduate students are marching side by side. In addition to the educators, more than 2,500 workers in facilities, residential life and dining services are taking initial steps to join the strike. These developments reflect immense anger among Rutgers workers at low wages and exploitation. They also indicate a strong desire to broaden and expand the strike.

Several Rutgers strikers expressed support for the ongoing struggle of 1,300 University of Michigan graduate students. The assistant teaching professor stated, "I support academic strikes across the country. All grad students should have a livable wage."

Andrew Parker, professor of French and Comparative Literature, stated, "Across the country, at five or six or different universities, there's something similar to this strike going on. It's not an accident." He noted, "The corporatization of the university has produced this kind of response," adding that "this has also meant the

professionalization of the administration and unions, as well.”

New Jersey’s Democratic Governor Phil Murphy is intervening forcefully to end the Rutgers strike as soon as possible. In fact, Murphy has been talking with high-level union bureaucrats and Rutgers administrators for months. His early involvement shows that the highest levels of the state government understand the militant mood among workers and the major significance of the strike.

Moreover, the union bureaucracies are deeply integrated with the Democratic Party and have long experience in imposing the demands of the corporations and banks on the working class. The initial effort to prevent the strike failed because of the unions’ inability to suppress the high level of frustration among workers.

“I’m not happy that it’s come to this,” Murphy told reporters at the Statehouse on Monday. He added that his talks with the unions and the university are continuing day and night. The figures involved include New Jersey AFL-CIO President Charles Wowkanech and Irene Mulvey, national president of the American Association of University Professors. During a meeting at his office on Monday, Murphy ordered the union bureaucrats and university administrators, “Figure this out ASAP.”

Murphy, a former Goldman Sachs executive, is looking to end the strike on terms favorable to the university as quickly as possible. Furthermore, he represents not only the interests of Wall Street but also those of US imperialism.

In February, Murphy became the first governor to visit Ukraine since the war began last year. During his unannounced visit, he met with political leaders and members of the Ukrainian military. It is highly likely that the political heirs of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army were among those to whom Murphy offered his support. These groups, which carried out pogroms and collaborated with the Nazis during World War II, are significant factions within the Ukrainian government.

After visiting Ukraine, Murphy traveled on to the Munich Security Conference in Germany, where the main item on the agenda was the war. He led a panel discussion at the conference, which Vice President Kamala Harris also attended. Murphy is thus deeply involved in the war, which is being overseen by President Joe Biden and the Democratic Party.

In 2022 alone, Congress appropriated more than \$112 billion for the war in Ukraine. These billions are being extracted from the working class through cuts to

education, health care and other vital social services. To pay for the war and wage it successfully requires the state to suppress workers’ growing opposition to low pay, high inflation and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

In this context, it is highly significant that Senator Bernie Sanders tweeted his support for the Rutgers strike mere minutes after it began on Monday.

Last year, Sanders played a major role in allowing Congress to ban a strike by more than 100,000 rail workers and to impose a pro-company contract on them—a contract that many of the workers had already rejected. Sanders introduced a resolution to provide paid sick days that was separate from the resolution on imposing the contract. The former resolution was predictably defeated, thus allowing the contract to be imposed on the workers quickly.

The involvement of Sanders in the Rutgers strike indicates that the entire Democratic Party at the state and federal levels is working feverishly to end the strike as soon as possible, as well as the academic workers strikes in Michigan and Illinois, two states also controlled by the Democrats.

The striking Rutgers workers are thus at a crossroads. If their fight is left in the hands of the union bureaucrats and the Democrats, it will be defeated quickly and workers will be faced with a contract that does not offer them meaningful raises—or, in the case of the graduate students, even a livable wage. To prevent such a defeat, the striking workers must break free from the stranglehold of the union bureaucracies and the Democrats and build independent rank-and-file committees to deepen and broaden their fight.

It is crucial for the striking academic workers to expand their struggle to other universities and other sections of the working class. The struggles at Rutgers, Michigan and Illinois are part of a global upsurge of workers strikes and protests against austerity—not only across the US but also in France, the United Kingdom, Sri Lanka and throughout the world. These struggles must be linked in a fight against the root cause of austerity and war: the capitalist system.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)