

Multi-state university strike wave in the US continues

Our reporters
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A powerful wave of university strikes in New Jersey, Illinois and Michigan continued Thursday. The campus strikes now involve over 11,000 academic workers at five different universities, including: 9,000 faculty and graduate students at Rutgers University in New Jersey, 260 faculty and staff at Governor's State University in Illinois, 1,300 grad students at the University of Michigan, 450 faculty and staff at Eastern Illinois University, and 100 faculty and staff at Chicago State University.

At each university, the academic workers and students are involved in a struggle for critical demands involving wage increases, better health care, improved working conditions and job security. The strikes come on the heels of similar struggles of tens of thousands of academic workers at the University of California and Temple University, as well as a wave of mass strikes and demonstrations of the working class in many countries around the world.

One of the critical challenges in the US academic strikes is that the militant mood and courage of the striking academic workers runs counter to the maneuvers of their union bureaucracies and the Democratic Party, which are seeking to limit and isolate each strike.

Six of the seven strikes taking place are organized by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). Not once has the AFT leadership suggested, for instance, that these strikes combine or mobilize broader sections of workers and students. In each situation, the issue of the formation of independent rank-and-file and strike committees is most critical in determining the future course of the strike.

Rutgers University: Union bureaucrats and “left” Democrats move to quickly shut down strike

At Rutgers, where three separate unions are waging the first campus-wide strike in school history, the union leaderships and the Democratic state administration of Governor Phil Murphy are working feverishly to shut down the strike as soon as possible. At the same time, these leaders are keenly aware that they may have a hard time ramming through any sellout agreement.

Union leaderships and the university administration continue to negotiate at the governor's office every day. On Thursday,

Catherine Monteleone, president of AAUP-BHSNJ, the union representing professors who teach health services and medical students, expressed the deference of the unions to the university and state, telling a local outlet, “We have to be respectful of each other's positions and time and with the group that we have to speak with. So it takes a lot of time to get everybody heard and everybody's issues there. But we're not gonna step on each other's toes. We're united to do this together. So it will take a while.”

In a long history of obsequiousness between union bureaucracies and management, this type of comment is perhaps a new low.

On Wednesday, Democratic Senator Bernie Sanders posted a Twitter video declaring his “support” for the Rutgers strike and endorsing Governor Murphy's intervention. While Sanders presents himself as an ally of the strikers, his “endorsement” of their strike and Murphy is, in fact, a clear warning that the preparations for a sellout are well advanced.

Two years ago, Sanders' intervention in the NYU graduate student strike similarly prefaced the sellout of the strike by the union leadership, largely affiliated with the Democratic Socialists of America, a caucus of the imperialist Democratic Party. In the Rutgers strike too, leading figures of the DSA such as Eric Blanc are now playing a central role in propping up the unions.

University of Michigan: Signs of an AFT sellout contrast with militancy of workers and students

Earlier this week, a circuit court decision conclusively rejected the University of Michigan's attempt to impose an injunction on the 1,300 striking graduate students. Yet there are growing signs that the union leadership of the Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO) is seeking a sellout accommodation with the university to end the strike.

At a Wednesday general membership meeting, while the bulk of the meeting was devoted to celebrating the failure of the university's injunction attempt, almost nothing was raised or discussed regarding the critical demand for a living wage, as well as other demands. The GEO initially demanded that the university institute a 60 percent raise in the first academic year of a new contract, in order to bring the poverty-level wages of graduate

student workers up to a “living wage.” However, last week they suddenly raised a second, much more open-ended and unclear, “supposal” offer that tied wages to monthly increases and a “summer bonus.”

While initially promising to discuss the nature of this new “supposal” on Wednesday, leadership instead only briefly mentioned that there will be a vote on compensation plans at the next bargaining session on Friday, without any further clarification on what that concretely means. No discussion time was set aside at the meeting for members to have the broadest possible discussion about their bargaining plans and strategies.

An email update was sent out by the GEO the next morning that stated the “bargaining team [will] be voting on whether to go in a *new direction* tomorrow” [emphasis added]. This “new direction” was not discussed with any seriousness at the Wednesday meeting, despite an overwhelming vote by the membership to continue the strike into the next week.

The GEO leadership, under the guidance of its parent union the AFT, which has institutional ties to the Democratic Party, has sought to limit the scope and broadening of the strike at every turn. Not once has it even been proposed that the GEO link up with the other three AFT unions on campus (LEO lecturers, UPAMM physician assistants, and the UMAPP diagnostic technicians) or mobilize undergraduates and the working class in its defense.

The continual isolation and suppression of serious discussion about the strike among the rank and file are beginning to have a visible impact. Wednesday’s membership meeting had a noticeable drop in overall attendance from the previous meetings, and the GEO leaders said that at least 10 departments on campus had approximately 50 percent or less of their graduate students on strike.

The actions of the Michigan AFT state leadership also indicate that a possible sellout agreement is being arranged and there will be an attempt to rush it past the membership. Earlier in the week, the AFT sent a brief email out to its K-12 school teacher membership, with very little explanation, of a call for a rally in Ann Arbor on Sunday to support the GEO strike. However, on Thursday the same email was sent around now with a “cancelled” logo through the advertisement, with no explanation as to why.

At a Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) membership meeting on Thursday, DFT President Lakia Lumpkins-Wilson suddenly announced that “the university of Michigan strike is over.” She claimed the graduate students had “won” a 60 percent pay raise, getting them to \$34,000, which would in fact *not* be a 60 percent pay raise. When pressed by membership as to where she had received this information, Lumpkins-Wilson refused to answer.

All of the maneuverings of the AFT and GEO leaders to limit and suppress the strike run counter to the courage and mood of militancy of the rank-and-file membership. On Wednesday and Thursday, the WSWs and several members of the IYSSE visited the pickets and spoke with graduate and undergraduate students about the strike and the underlying political issues driving the wave of academic struggles, including the endless and reckless imperialist war drive by American imperialism towards direct confrontation with Russia and China. More on these discussions will be reported in a forthcoming WSWS article.

Illinois: Strikes threaten to expand

Faculty and staff at Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU), located in Chicago, voted to authorize a strike on Thursday by a 95 percent margin. NEIU faculty and staff are members of University Professionals of Illinois (UPI) Local 4100, whose chapters at Chicago State University (CSU), Governors State University (GSU) and Eastern Illinois University (EIU) are currently on strike against low pay and high workloads.

Faculty at all four campuses have suffered years of stagnating wages, especially in the wake of the state’s budget impasse from 2015-17 under then governor Bruce Rauner. With universities operating without support from the state, faculty were pressured into accepting pay raises at or below the rate of inflation. Faculty and staff at GSU were given only a 0.7 percent raise in 2016, the first year of their three-year contract, and received no raises in the two subsequent years.

Now, with inflation continuing at high levels, university administrators are attempting to push through insultingly low pay raises that would amount to massive cuts in real wages for faculty and enshrine a long-term lowering in their standard of living.

Administrators at EIU issued a statement after midnight on Wednesday saying they had made their “last, best and final” offer to faculty and staff on that campus and claimed that union negotiators then abruptly walked out. EIU President David Glassman had previously issued a statement saying the union was calling for salary increases of 7 percent in the first year, 5 percent in the second and third years, and 4 percent in the fourth, while the university was offering just 3.75 percent, 3 percent for years 2 and 3 and 2.25 percent for the fourth year.

All four universities have suffered from the devastating levels of disinvestment in higher education by the State of Illinois for more than two decades. The Center for Tax and Budget Accountability issued a report recently demonstrating that when adjusted for inflation, state spending on higher education fell almost in half, by \$1.8 billion, from its budgeted amount in 2020. In 2003, state support amounted to 72 percent of university revenue, with tuition and fees providing the remaining 28 percent. Now, tuition and fees account for 65 percent of university revenue.



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