

Unions betray 9,000 Rutgers academic workers by suspending strike without a tentative agreement

Erik Schreiber
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Before dawn on Saturday, New Jersey's Democratic Governor Phil Murphy announced that Rutgers University officials and union leaders had agreed to an unspecified framework for new contracts for 9,000 part-time and full-time faculty, graduate students, researchers and clinicians who had been on strike for five days.

In a monumental betrayal, the leaders of the three unions involved in the strike voted to accept this framework, "suspend our strike and return to work immediately." Classes at all three Rutgers campuses will resume on Monday, even though tentative agreements have not even been finalized and negotiations are ongoing. Union officials admitted that the most critical issues, including compensation and benefits, bargaining agreements for instructors on fellowships, housing costs, a \$15 minimum wage for all campus workers, and more, all remain unresolved.

The Rutgers strike has affected more than 67,000 students at campuses in New Brunswick, Newark and Camden, making it one of the largest higher education strikes in US history. It began near the end of the spring semester as students were preparing for final exams and commencement. By attempting to end the strike now, union leaders are squandering workers' leverage without any democratic input from their members.

Rank-and-file workers at Rutgers must organize immediately to prepare a struggle against the sellout of the strike, and to instead broaden it as widely as possible. The rising tide of strikes and protests at other universities and in other industries worldwide demonstrates that the Rutgers workers are by no means alone. They must form rank-and-file committees to continue the struggle, break through the isolation imposed by the union leadership, and reach out to other workers across state and national lines.

The timing of Murphy's announcement, which was made just before 1 a.m. on Saturday, underscores the fact that he, university administrators and the union bureaucrats have been working night and day to shut down the strike as quickly as possible. Doing so is an urgent matter for the state government and the Democratic Party, which cannot tolerate workers' unrest as they wage war against Russia in Ukraine and prepare

for war with China over Taiwan. Murphy, who has traveled to Ukraine and is involved in the war against Russia, took it upon himself to suppress this powerful strike before it could spread.

In a lying statement to their members, the union bureaucrats defensively said that the strike has not been canceled, stating, "If we do not secure the gains we need on the open issues through bargaining in the coming days, we can and will resume our work stoppage." This empty promise is meant to mitigate workers' anger over the premature ending of the strike. "We also will continue putting significant pressure on the Rutgers administration to meet our needs, starting with informational pickets next week," said the union leaders. But informational pickets are no more than an impotent gesture.

Developments at Rutgers are part of a wave of strikes at colleges and universities across the country, including in Democrat-led Michigan, Illinois, Vermont, and Rhode Island. Almost all of the unions involved are affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), a key prop of the Democratic Party. Educators are rebelling against inflation, the rising cost of living and schools' increasing reliance on poorly paid adjunct professors. The conspiracy between Rutgers administrators, the union leadership and the state government sets a precedent for the betrayal of these other strikes.

At the University of Michigan, 1,300 graduate student instructors are fighting for a living wage. Although a county judge refused to grant an injunction to stop their strike, officials leading the Graduate Employees Organization (GEO) union are working with the AFT to end the strike and impose a sellout agreement on their members as soon as possible. At Friday's bargaining session, the GEO-AFT leadership introduced a formal proposal that drops the grad students' central demand for a 60 percent salary increase, which the University is now considering.

At Eastern Illinois University, on Thursday evening officials announced a tentative agreement with the union, which suspended a strike of 450 faculty and staff members. Union leaders sent their members back to work before members even voted on the TA, even though the university refused to compensate faculty for days missed while on strike.

At Governor's State University in Illinois, where 260 faculty and staff members are on strike, union leaders are calling on governor J. B. Pritzker to intervene in the strike, hoping that he will end it as Murphy is attempting to end the Rutgers strike.

Under the leadership of AFT President Randi Weingarten—who, like Murphy, actively supports the war in Ukraine—AFT officials are keeping these strikes isolated from each another so that they can be defeated more easily. The strikes all are occurring in states controlled by the Democratic Party, which is relying heavily on the trade union bureaucracy to suppress the class struggle.

In a statement to their members, the unions involved in the Rutgers strike—the Rutgers American Association of University Professors-AFT (AAUP-AFT), the Rutgers Adjunct Faculty Union (PTLFC-AAUP-AFT) and the American Association of University Professors-Biomedical and Health Sciences of New Jersey (AAUP-BHSNJ)—said that they “have secured profound victories.” In the statement released by Murphy's office, Rebecca Givan, president of Rutgers AAUP-AFT, touted the framework's “unprecedented gains.”

The tone was markedly different, however, at an online meeting that the union leaders held at noon on Saturday. Amy Higer, president of PTLFC, acknowledged that none of the biomedical faculty's demands had been negotiated. “We are standing in solidarity with them,” she said as she announced the suspension of the strike. For Higer, solidarity apparently means giving up the fight and leaving one's brothers and sisters twisting in the wind.

AAUP-AFT official Carla Katz announced that full-time, nontenured faculty would gain presumptively renewable contracts, which she described as “tenure-like.” These workers also will gain average raises of 6 percent, which barely keeps pace with inflation.

Maria Garth, a graduate student worker in art history who is part of the bargaining committee, reported that what the framework provides graduate student workers “is short of a living wage.” But, she claimed without conviction, it is an improvement.

Sarah DeGiorgis, another graduate student worker, said that fellows would now have a process for gaining union recognition. In practice, this will mean little more than a new source of dues payments for the union bureaucracy. She also announced a \$5,000 childcare subsidy for workers who are parents. This amount is less than half of the annual cost of childcare in New Jersey.

By 2025, adjunct professors will receive a 48 percent raise, teaching and graduate assistants will receive a 33 percent raise and full-time faculty and counselors will receive a 14 percent raise. A 28 percent raise in minimum pay for postdoctoral fellows and associates also was announced. Any agreement will be retroactive to 2022. Even the largest raise barely surpasses the rate of inflation, and will do nothing to lift adjunct professors out of poverty and debt.

For the biomedical faculty, who are being left out to dry by the other unions' leaders, management offered to provide parental leave but take away their sick time, which the union rejected. Cathy Monteleone, president of AAUP-BHSNJ, stated simply, “We didn't have as much luck.” Protected academic time is still not guaranteed for these workers, nor did they get the longer-term contracts that they demand. Monteleone accused management of not bargaining in good faith.

Speaking for research faculty, Michael Matisse said, “We're nowhere near done on a lot of critical issues.” Cuts to these workers' incentive award money have been partially restored, but Matisse acknowledged that there has been no improvement to laboratory workers' salaries. In addition, research faculty still lack paid family leave and protection against de-tenuring.

One remarkable aspect of Saturday's union meeting was that several union officials, including Higer and Donna Murch, president of the New Brunswick chapter of Rutgers AAUP-AFT, praised Governor Murphy effusively for his intervention in the strike. These comments were consistent with remarks that the officials made in the statement released by Murphy's office.

“We would not have gotten here without our members' commitment and the support of our governor,” said Givan in that statement. She even spoke favorably of Rutgers President Jonathan Holloway. Higer, too, was quoted as saying that she “deeply appreciated” the efforts of the governor and his staff.

If these union leaders have so much affection for Murphy and even Holloway, then just who is the adversary? Why was there even a strike? In fact, these obsequious comments show that the unions, the university administration and the state are all on the same side. They confirm the *World Socialist Web Site's* previous warnings that the AFT was colluding with the Democrats to betray the workers. There is no conflict between these parties, all of which serve the capitalist class and seek to suppress the growing struggles of the working class.



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