Faculty union ends strike at Illinois universities

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On Monday, faculty and staff at Chicago State University, members of the University Professionals of Illinois union, were sent back to work after a 10-day strike. The UPI, an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers, announced the "suspension" of the strike after a four-year tentative agreement was reached with CSU administration. The workers were sent back without any details of the deal and before a ratification vote was even scheduled.

The Chicago State faculty union, part of UPI Local 4100, had asked for a 6.5 percent wage increase in the first year of the contract, while the CSU administration proposed 3 percent plus a $1,000 lump sum payment. Neither proposal would adequately address inflation, which has hovered between 7 and 8 percent over the past two years. CSU faculty are some of the lowest-paid faculty in the state of Illinois, and out-of-pocket health care costs could rise as part of the contract.

The *Chicago Sun-Times* reported Chicago State faculty union President Valerie Goss saying, "the deal provides pay increases for faculty and staff 'while recognizing the university's financial constraints.'"

UPI officials have consistently told the media that the details of the four-year agreement at CSU would not be released until the membership has voted on the agreement at a yet-to-be-announced voting date. The UPI Local 4100 Facebook page posted that a tentative agreement was announced on Sunday evening, without any details or voting date.

Less than 48 hours afterwards, UPI Local 4100 announced a TA at Governors State University, south of Chicago, and suspension of the five-day strike of 260 faculty and staff. Similarly to Goss, Governors State University Professionals of Illinois President Mike Hart said in a press release, "This contract is a step towards strengthening our university and the support we can give our students, and it will contribute to attracting high-quality educators and retaining the excellent faculty and staff we have. We are looking forward to reviewing the details with our members and will hold a vote to ratify the contract."

The GSU vote was said to be scheduled "in the coming days," according to CBS News Chicago, the day it was announced.

Last week, Eastern Illinois University UPI President Jennifer Stringfellow announced that the six-day strike was suspended following "consideration" of an offer by the administration. Like faculty and staff at CSU and GSU, EIU strikers were told to go back to work Friday without being given the full contract or knowing when they would vote on the agreement.

The actions of the UPI bureaucracy are a travesty of democracy. Any agreement being pushed on such a basis should be overwhelmingly rejected by members in principle. At the same time, the UPI officials are resorting to such methods because the deal they have agreed to will leave faculty struggling financially.

After the deal at CSU was struck, Goss stated, "Most importantly, this agreement ensures that our members can make up critical time we lost supporting our students during the strike through extended office hours, tutoring sessions, registration meetings, exam sessions, and other services." The bargaining team at EIU also stated that it "did not endorse the administration's proposal at the meeting Thursday because the administration did not offer the union members a chance to do work they missed during the strike."

In other words, despite the massive strike funds of the AFT and the Illinois Federation of Teachers, the unions did nothing seriously to sustain the workers during the strike and basically sought to starve them into

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submission. At the same time, they are boasting that their members will be forced to work extra hours to make ends meet.

The strike was a courageous and self-sacrificing act by the rank and file to fight for higher wages and better working conditions, not only for themselves but across the university systems. The biggest obstacle was the union bureaucracy, which is deeply tied to the Democratic Party machine, which is imposing ruthless austerity measures on public and higher education while finding endless money for bank bailouts, corporate tax cuts and the funding of war.

Throughout the UPI strikes at three Illinois universities, the unions kept academic workers at Chicago State University, Eastern Illinois University and Governors State University isolated from each other. Even within the campuses, the UPI officials kept the striking faculty and staff isolated from students who supported their striking instructors that they depend on for their education.

The faculty union and the state and national teacher unions also worked to keep university workers isolated from the wider struggles of the working class, including but not limited to graduate worker strikes at the University of Michigan and faculty and staff strikes at Rutgers University in New Jersey. The UPI Facebook page did not even report any concrete information on picket times for other workers and students to show solidarity with the workers.

This follows the same pattern of the United Auto Workers' sellout of the six-week strike by 48,000 teaching assistants and other academic workers at the University of California late last year. After the UAW agreed to below inflation rate wages in one of the highest cost-of-living areas in the world, University officials blamed supposedly high labor costs for their decision to close three university libraries.

Last week, the AFT-affiliated Rutgers American Association of University Professors and the Rutgers Adjunct Faculty Union, along the American Association of University Professors, sold out the five-day strike by 9,000 academic workers at three campuses of Rutgers University. The union accepted the "framework" of a deal crafted by New Jersey's Democratic Governor Phil Murphy, suspended the walkout and ordered strikers to return to work though the 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.

Faculty and staff at Chicago State University, Eastern Illinois University and Governors State University must prevent a similar betrayal by demanding the full release of the contract and a full week to discuss it before any vote. At the same time, educators should organize their own rank-and-file committees to organize opposition to the sellout and demand the resumption of the strike. These committees will unite academic workers, teachers and other education workers, along with broader sections of the working class, to defend the right to high quality and free higher education for all.

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