

“We felt nothing short of betrayed”

Rutgers workers speak out against the shutdown of their strike

Our reporters
21 April 2023

Last weekend, three unions affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), working closely with New Jersey’s Democratic Governor Phil Murphy, undemocratically suspended the powerful strike by 9,000 academic workers at Rutgers University, ordering workers back to work without having even reached tentative agreements.

This act of betrayal by the union bureaucracies and the Democratic Party has produced an outpouring of anger and opposition by graduate students, adjuncts, researchers and clinicians, who rightfully see their struggle as having been sold out.

In the week following the shutdown of the strike, union leaders have only feigned frustration over the fact that their suspension did nothing but completely weaken their negotiating position at a time in which workers had the most power withholding their labor at the end of the semester.

In an interview with *Político*, Rutgers AAUP-AFT Vice President Todd Wolfson pathetically stated, “We got back to New Brunswick, and it’s been the same tricks ... slow bargaining, not responding to critical demands, playing whatever foolish stupid games they’ve been playing. So yes, we are pissed off.”

As of this writing, none of the three unions has negotiated a tentative agreement.

On Thursday, reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Sarah, an English Department Ph.D. candidate, at a New Brunswick picket outside the Rutgers Board of Governors meeting. Sharing her thoughts on the suspension of the strike, Sarah stated, “To be frank, I was disappointed. I think that we had a lot of traction, we had a lot of great press, we had the support of our undergraduate students, we had an amazing coalition. ... We could have kept fighting and gotten more of our demands.”

She added, “I think part of the thing that was great about this strike in particular was how large and pervasive it was and how much it was following up on the energy of some of the other university strikes that were going on this year and last year. I think we could have gone a lot farther than we did. I think that a lot of us over the weekend felt nothing short of betrayed by

the executive committee that voted on this. ... The suspension was rough.”

Indeed, the sellout at Rutgers set the stage for the betrayals of three strikes by faculty and staff at Chicago-area universities, as well as smaller strikes at campuses in Rhode Island and Vermont. The strike by 1,300 graduate student workers at the University of Michigan is now the only continuing strike on a university campus in the US, when one week prior there were seven taking place simultaneously in five different states.

Sarah also spoke on the role played by the AFT in collaboration with Governor Murphy, noting, “I think there is a general sentiment here among grad students and part-time lecturers, at least that I’ve spoken to, that the leadership of the unions were very hasty to proclaim victory. Also, the position of Governor Murphy was a little bit unclear to a lot of us in terms of whose side, exactly, he was gunning for and whether his intervention was actually helpful to us or not.

“Especially last weekend, with everyone proclaiming victory and Governor Murphy getting invited to give a talk at some Democratic ‘progressive’ conference, it felt like there’s going to be a hasty proclamation of ‘victory’ and claims that ‘this is a pro-union state,’ and we’re not sure that this is actually reflective. I don’t know how much of this is a sort of surface win for the AFT. We all feel like they could be doing a lot more.”

The idea of forming a rank-and-file organization independent of the union bureaucracy, in order to take back power into workers’ hands, was raised with Sarah. “In terms of breaking off, yeah, that’s something people are thinking about, and I hope that’s been made clear to the AFT because they’ve fractured us a bit.”

Cindy, an undergraduate studying Civil Engineering, told the WSWWS on Friday, “Everyone I spoke to was pretty shocked that there was so much energy and support for the strike and then, all of a sudden, it was suspended. Some of my friends assumed it was over and were saying, ‘all that for nothing.’” Cindy expressed support for a continuation of the strike if the demands of the rank and file are not met.

Another undergraduate, Mike, also expressed his support

Friday for a resumption of the strike, stating, “Yes, I feel the overwhelming majority of students are in support of the strike and better benefits for the teachers. It’s just something that needs to be done.”

Oppositional comments to the shutdown of the strike have also exploded on social media.

One Rutgers grad student worker posted a photo on Twitter of the AAUP-AFT’s Zoom session where the union announced the suspension of the strike, showing dozens of hands raised. “The ugly truth of ‘historic success’ of Rutgers union. They Ignored all these raised hands and want to be heroes.”

Significantly, a University of California grad worker retweeted the post, commenting, “This is what happened with #UAW2865: leadership refused to listen to rank and file workers, shoe-horning in a terrible contract. We are suffering because of it: still haven’t been paid our paltry raise we were supposed to get 90 days after ratification. Meanwhile several of the leaders who threw us under the bus now have cushy career union positions: they don’t even have to live under the contract they forced on us. Rutgers: Solidarity! It’s YOUR union and YOU, the workers, decide when to stop striking.”

In response to Democratic Senator Bernie Sanders congratulating Rutgers unions on their “successful strike” on Twitter—stating, “When workers stand together & fight for justice there’s nothing they cannot accomplish”—a Rutgers worker responded, “This isn’t a win. Union leadership scabbed & decided to break the strike without letting rank & file members vote. There is no agreement, only a ‘framework,’ & many workers are still left out of the deal if it even goes through. The union sold out its workers.”

AAUP-AFT tweeted about a “Suspension de-stress” event involving acupuncture, to which a grad student responded, “Acupuncture? So like, come on down and get stabbed in the back?”

Reddit threads on the strike suspension have elicited hundreds of comments opposing the unions’ betrayal.

One user wrote:

The graduate workers have been betrayed by our union, by the state government, and as usual, by Rutgers University. This ‘framework’ is not a legally binding agreement like what would typically be reached during bargaining. This ‘framework’ is not something that the entirety of the union has seen or voted on.

Additionally, just cause Holloway is Holloway, he has worded this as if the strike is over. A suspended strike is not ended, but it’s going to cause so much confusion that it might as well be. The union made an incredibly stupid or incredibly malicious decision by agreeing to suspend the strike without any clear idea of what that means at all. There will be more bargaining this coming week, so why has the strike stopped? We have so many

demands that still need to be bargained over, not even just graduate worker-related issues.

As a grad fellow, my sibling grad workers and I are distraught. ... How do we have any power without the strike? Grad workers are here because we want to improve our lives and the lives of others. Rutgers makes us and our loved ones suffer through years of exploitation before we have the chance to succeed.

Speaking about the supposed victory, other grad workers said:

- “A lot of us grad students will be gone by the time the salary gets to 40k. We need to be able to afford to live in NJ now, not in 4 years.”

- “The point is for grads to get a living wage, not get toward a living wage.”

- “We should go protest again, but instead of in front of Holloway’s mansion it should be in front of the Union’s offices. ‘Backstabbing comrades ain’t the way, grads deserve a living wage.’”

- “There was no democratic process involved with accepting the terms of this framework, or ending the strike, and that is unacceptable.”

- “I hope that the rank and file get a chance to assert themselves somehow, would really be a shame for all this preparation and agitation to go to waste due to the actions of a treacherous union leadership.”

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) issued a statement Thursday stressing that the struggle at Rutgers is not over. To carry out a real fight, rank-and-file workers must not allow the union bureaucracy to continue to betray them but take power into their own hands by forming an independent rank-and-file committee and turning out to the broader working class. We urge all academic workers at Rutgers to contact us today to form a rank-and-file committee by filling out the form below.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact