

Opposition from Rutgers academic workers grows against AFT-backed contract proposals

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Are you a Rutgers University academic worker? Fill out the form at the end of this article to get more information about building a rank-and-file committee to defeat the sellout deal and expand the strike.

Late Sunday, the leaders of three unions at Rutgers University in New Jersey voted to accept and recommend ratification of tentative agreements (TAs) that they negotiated behind closed doors with the university administration. This follows the unpopular suspension of the strike two weeks ago by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT)-affiliated academic unions.

The resulting TAs will be voted on by workers later this week. By giving workers only a few days to review the contents of the four-year contract, the union bureaucracy is attempting to stampede workers into ratifying a deal that does not come close to what they fought for in the state university's first-ever strike. Workers should reject such measures with contempt and vote "no" on the contracts!

The details that have become public testify to the rotten character of these agreements. Full-time faculty will receive raises ranging from only 3.25 percent to 3.75 percent during the four years of the contract, which retroactively begins September 2022. All these raises are far below the rate of inflation, which was 8.2 percent in September and is currently around five percent. This means that real wages for full-time faculty will be cut. Moreover, the raise proposed in the third year is to be paid as a "merit" increase, which means not all workers will qualify.

In addition, graduate student workers will see their annual salary rise from \$34,678 in the first year of the contract to only \$40,000 in the fourth year. But even the latter salary "is short of a living wage," as Maria Garth, a graduate student worker and member of the bargaining committee, admitted during an online meeting after the unions had agreed to the framework language.

The details related to health insurance have not been finalized. They will be worked out in future bargaining that includes other Rutgers unions. This arrangement, which is an insult to all Rutgers workers, is particularly harmful for part-time lecturers. The latter constitute an especially exploited section of academic workers and often do not have adequate health benefits.

A graduate student worker at Rutgers told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the leadership of her union had accepted the university's—not the workers'—terms regarding graduate student raises. The language appears to put the onus on the individual academic departments, and not the university itself, to fund these raises, she said. These terms make it likely that departments will have to use money already allocated to other expenses to pay workers. As of Sunday, the worker had not heard any information about the language from union officials.

Workers and students have expressed their anger at the TAs on social media. The terms will ensure that the university continues to have "access to cheap, precarious grad workers," a doctoral student in media studies at Rutgers wrote on Twitter. Noting the unions' responsibility for this betrayal, he added, "These contracts are monuments to neoliberalism, and you don't have to see [radical sociologist] C. Wright Mills to see AFT is part of the problem, not the solution."

The Rutgers strike began on April 10 when 9,000 professors, graduate students, adjuncts, researchers and clinicians walked off the job to demand improved pay, job security and other needs such as family leave and child care benefits. It was a powerful expression of solidarity between different sections of the university's academic workforce. The strike affected 67,000 students at the university's campuses in New Brunswick, Newark and Camden.

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 worked around the clock with the Rutgers administration and Democratic Governor Phil Murphy to gain control of the situation.

In the early morning of April 15, five days after the strike began, Murphy announced that the unions had agreed to suspend the strike in exchange for a framework for new contracts. No tentative agreement had been reached, and no workers were consulted on the suspension of the strike, which produced an outpouring of opposition. The union leaders acknowledged that crucial issues related to pay, benefits and housing costs were unresolved. Moreover, negotiations on the biomedical faculty's demands had not even begun. But in an egregious betrayal, the unions ordered their members to report to work on the following Monday.

In revealing comments, union officials including Rutgers AAUP-AFT President Rebecca Givan and PTLFC President Amy Higer praised Murphy and Rutgers President Jonathan Holloway effusively for their efforts. Murphy, like President Joe Biden, presents himself as a friend of workers while relying on the union bureaucracies to suppress the class struggle. At the beginning of the strike, Holloway declared that the action was illegal and threatened to seek an injunction to end it. The compliments that Givan and Higer showered on their ostensible opponents make clear that the union leadership, the university administration and the state government are in fact united in opposition to rank-and-file Rutgers workers.

The Rutgers strike occurred simultaneously with the walkout by 1,300 graduate students at the University of Michigan, which is still ongoing. Academic workers' strikes have also taken place at universities in Illinois, Vermont and Rhode Island. These workers are fighting back against the rising cost of living, high inflation and universities' increasing exploitation of adjunct professors, who are poorly paid.

Notably, these strikes have all taken place in states controlled by the Democratic Party. Randi Weingarten, president of the AFT and a member of the Democratic National Committee, has spent years scouring the country to put down strikes against austerity and the forced reopening of schools during the pandemic by Democratic city officials.

Last year, the Democrats cooperated with the Republicans to ban a strike of 120,000 railroad workers and impose a pro-company contract that many of the

workers already had rejected. Under Biden, the Democrats are overseeing and escalating the NATO proxy war against Russia and the war buildup against China and squandering vast resources on imperialist wars that could lead to the nuclear annihilation of the planet.

The tentative agreements, which the unions hatched in collusion with Murphy and Holloway and which they are attempting to coerce their members into ratifying, are an attack on workers. Rutgers workers must firmly reject these attempts.

Furthermore, workers at Rutgers cannot win their demands while their struggle remains trapped within the clutches of the trade union bureaucracy that collaborates with the state to betray them. A democratically controlled rank-and-file committee must be formed that will transfer power from the union apparatus and put it in the hands of workers themselves. These organizations will be the basis for continuing and expanding the struggle at Rutgers, which pits workers against the profit system.

As the International Youth and Students for Social Equality's (IYSSE) statement, "Build a rank-and-file committee to continue the Rutgers strike!" said:

As was the case with the rail workers and West Coast dock workers, the Democratic Party fear above all that the strike of Rutgers workers could spark a broader struggle of the working class.

This is exactly what workers at Rutgers must fight to do. Rutgers workers cannot win their battle for higher pay, job security, adequate benefits and safe working conditions alone! The strike must break out of the isolation imposed upon it by the unions and the Democratic Party, and turn to the working class in New Jersey, New York and beyond.

To get more information on building rank-and-file committees, fill out the form below.



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