

Faculty at 2 Michigan universities set for potential strike as fall classes start

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Over 680 faculty members at Oakland University (OU) in Detroit's northern suburbs could strike Tuesday, following a unanimous strike vote over the weekend. Classes are scheduled to start September 4.

The last pay offer by the OU administration was an insulting 16 percent increase over five years. The OU chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) is publicly calling for a 30 percent package. Talks began in June, and the previous contract expired August 14 but was extended to September 3.

Oakland University faculty may soon be joined on the picket lines by 900 faculty at Western Michigan University (WMU) in Kalamazoo who are starting the school year without a contract. The instructors want raises of 8.5 percent and 8.75 percent over the next two years. The school administration has offered 3 percent or a \$2,500 base salary increase, whichever is greater.

WMU instructors last staged a strike in 1977.

Staff at both universities are seeking to offset the sharp rise in the cost of living by asking for significant pay increases. Faculty at Oakland University, an independent public university that receives state funding, earn about 25 percent less than college staff at other universities nationwide, according to the AAUP-AFT.

Local AAUP officials have made it clear they are seeking to lower faculty expectations in the talks. Michael Latcha, an OU associate professor and president of the AAUP at OU, told WXYZ news: "The sides are really not all that far apart. We are confident and hopeful that the university can put something on the table we can agree to and we can be in class Wednesday morning when students show up."

An AAUP press spokesman said, "What's at stake isn't about getting faculty large gains. At this point it's about trying to make sure we don't fall any further

behind."

Another union spokesman, Jeff Youngquist, said in a statement quoted in the *Detroit News*, "For the last decade or more, we've taken raises so low that they've actually been real world pay cuts."

At Western Michigan University, the AAUP has accused the administration of using the campus email system to promote its bargaining stance and stoke hostility against faculty. It blamed the university for inciting recent vandalism at the union's offices, where flyers and placards were torn up and strewn around, as well as anonymous threatening e-mails to AAUP officials.

WMU faculty are seeking to recover from real pay cuts suffered in recent years due to inadequate 2 percent wage increases in the face of more than 20 percent overall cost-of-living rises since 2020.

In 2021 the union at Oakland agreed to a miserable 3.5 percent pay raise over the term of a three-year agreement after a two-day strike. The deal also included lower employer contributions to healthcare and retirement.

OU administrators used pandemic funding to increase their own salaries while attacking faculty. As of 2024 Oakland University President Ora Hirsch Pescovitz earned \$517,673 per year. Other administrators earn in excess of \$200,000. By contrast under terms of the current agreement faculty base salary starts at just \$45,000 a year, about the current starting pay now at many auto factories.

The contract battles at OU and WMU take place in the context of rising militancy among academic workers and wider sections of the working class seeking to counter eroding pay and deteriorating working conditions.

Universities across the United States are seeking to

offload the impact of falling enrollments due to demographic changes and the crushing burden of student debt onto the backs of faculty and staff. Universities are also struggling with the ending of pandemic-related assistance and chronic underfunding by the state.

In January of this year, 29,000 members of the California State Faculty Association struck for a 12 percent pay increase. The strike was called off after just one day by the union and a sellout forced down the throats of faculty in a sham vote. Workers were given the option of voting “yes” on the below-inflation deal or voting “no” and accepting the university’s previous final imposed offer.

Rising social discontent among educators has been reflected in a series of walkouts by graduate teaching assistants and other academic workers. Some 6,000 academic workers at the University of Washington struck for one-day in May in Seattle, one of the highest cost-of-living areas in the US.

Academic workers at the University of California system struck in May to protest the administration’s violent crackdown on anti-genocide protests that included a standdown by police to allow pro-Zionist thugs to brutalize students.

Wide sections of the academic workforce have become proletarianized, with casual employment on a contingent part-time basis and tenure increasingly out of reach. While those seeking to enter the job market often face crushing debt, pay levels in academia are stagnating, with entry-level positions offering little more than subsistence income.

Higher education is increasingly under the thumb of giant corporations and wealthy donors as public funding has evaporated, diverted into the coffers of Wall Street and the military-industrial complex.

Time and again education workers have seen their struggles to overcome these conditions thwarted by the corrupt apparatus of the trade unions, allied to the big business Democratic Party.



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