

# University of Michigan-Dearborn signals “unprecedented” cuts and layoffs

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Over 150 faculty, staff and students at the University of Michigan-Dearborn (UM-D) campus gathered on Tuesday, December 3 to protest looming department cuts and staff layoffs in the upcoming winter semester. The Lecturers’ Employee Organization (LEO), the main union for over 1,800 lecturers and non-tenure-track faculty at the three University of Michigan (UM) campuses, issued a statement on November 26 that warned of major cuts and layoffs in the coming months at UM-D. The union called the protest, which was joined by members of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and the UM Dearborn Student Government. The LEO is affiliated to the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).

Though no official announcements have been issued by the university, UM-D officials in the College of Arts, Sciences, and Letters (CASL) began quietly making significant changes to several departments after winter registration closed in mid-November. The CASL Dean’s Office canceled several upper-level courses and drastically increased the class size for many other courses, in several cases doubling the size of the classes. There are also plans to shift many classes to an online format, which will facilitate staff cuts.

The moves are a clear signal that the university intends to begin implementing full and partial layoffs and force those who remain to teach much larger classes without any additional financial or logistical support.

The cuts primarily target CASL students and faculty majoring and teaching in the departments of Philosophy; Journalism and Media Production; History; Writing and possibly more. In response to media inquiries by the *Michigan Daily*, the student newspaper, the vice chancellor for external relations, Kenneth Kettenbeil, said the CASL “is experiencing challenging financial times, like many liberal arts colleges across the country and ... the college is considering a variety options.”

During the summer, UM-D Chancellor Domenico

Grasso said that despite increased enrollment for the 2024-25 academic year and a 4.7 percent increase in tuition costs, the university faced “continued inflation and ... a significant increase in costs related to insurance.” He added that each unit on campus had already “identified ways to reduce their spending...”

The cuts and course alterations were decided in mid-November, after students and faculty had already registered and been assigned their courses for the winter semester. According to the online education newspaper *Higher Ed Dive*, a university spokesman indicated that the administration will announce cuts and layoffs on December 20—during the lull between the end of the fall semester and the start of the winter semester on January 6.

Significant opposition has already emerged to the cuts, including three separate online petition letters of protest issued to the university by faculty, students and community members. Collectively, the petitions have gathered nearly 1,200 signatures in less than two weeks.

The lecturers at UM-D, like virtually every campus in the US, are a critical and highly exploited section of educators. They often teach courses previously taught by tenured faculty, but at much lower wages. They often enter the workforce saddled with significant student loan debt. They are dependent on teaching opportunities and wages that are almost always guaranteed for only one year, or even one semester. Their vulnerability is exploited at every turn.

The lecturers’ situation reflects the turn by the ruling class toward the casualization of the university system’s labor force, both in the US and other parts of the world. This, in turn, is part of the drive to enlarge and normalize the global “gig economy.”

The chair of the LEO at UM-D, Jamie Wright, acknowledged to the *Michigan Daily* that the lecturers are now accustomed to enduring debilitating cuts every semester. It is just that this semester’s cuts appear to be

much larger than “normal.”

He said: “That’s how most of us began to really hear that this was going to be kind of deeper cuts than what we’re used to seeing this time of year—much deeper, a lot deeper. I think somebody used the word unprecedented—and that it was going to affect more than just one or two disciplines.”

The attack on the humanities, liberal arts and social sciences across the country is often carried out in concert with an influx of funding from the Department of Defense for programs that directly serve US imperialism and the intelligence apparatus. At UM-D, the administration boasted of a \$3.5 million grant in January 2024 for the College of Engineering and Computer Science to assist the Defense Department with design-build systems for an “optionally manned fighting vehicle” and secure cloud-based technology.

Key to the attack on lecturers and staff across the country has been the role of the bureaucracies of the educators’ unions—the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association (NEA). Dozens of strikes, involving tens of thousands of educators, lecturers and school staff have broken out in 2024 alone, including last spring’s strike by 40,000 University of California workers and a strike by over 9,000 Massachusetts school teachers in November. At each point, the union bureaucracy has played the key role in isolating the strikes and blocking any wider struggle.

At UM, the bureaucracy within the LEO played a critical role in preventing a strike by the lecturers when the most recent contract expired last April 20. The rank and file voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike, including by 95 percent among lecturers at UM-D.

Instead, the LEO-AFT bureaucracy quickly rushed through a sellout contract in which none of the core demands were met, including pay parity across UM’s three campuses, a large wage increase in the first year of the contract to counteract inflation, an end to the “no strike” clause, increased healthcare coverage and better provisions on job security and appointments.

The LEO bureaucracy has not raised the prospect of a joint struggle by lecturers at all three campuses (Ann Arbor, Dearborn and Flint) to defend Dearborn workers against the cuts. Nor has the union leadership even hinted at a possible strike, adhering to the no-strike clause in the current contract, which the LEO presented to the rank-and-file at the time of its ratification last May as a “historic victory.”

At every turn, the LEO bureaucracy has worked to

block a unified struggle to defend lecturers and staff. Last April, the LEO contract expiration coincided with the establishment by UM students at the Ann Arbor campus of an encampment in solidarity with the Palestinians in Gaza, demanding that the university end its financial connections to the genocide in Gaza. The UM encampment was part of a wave of similar actions taking place on campuses across the country.

The LEO leadership, in line with AFT President Randi Weingarten’s support for US imperialism and the Israeli Zionist regime, acted to isolate the student protesters and block a common struggle by students, faculty and staff. This opened the door for the university to sic the police on the student protesters and violently shut down their encampment one week after the LEO contract vote.

At the time, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at UM and the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee issued a statement exposing the treachery of the LEO/AFT leadership. The statement urged rank-and-file lecturers to reject the sellout contract, unite with the students and broaden the fight into a conscious political struggle against the Democratic administrations in Washington and Lansing, Michigan and their program of austerity and imperialist war.

In order to fight against these attacks, lecturers, staff and students must link up across the UM campuses. But they must also broaden the fight to include K-12 educators as well as other sections of workers, including autoworkers fighting mass layoffs, and more than 250 Marathon refinery workers who are on strike just miles from the campus.

Every section of the working class faces similar or worse conditions as those confronting the lecturers at UM-Dearborn. All of these struggles can and must be unified. What is key is the formation of independent rank-and-file organizations, not to pressure the union bureaucracy but to overthrow it and put the power in the hands of the workers themselves.



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