

University of Akron announces plan to eliminate 178 professors, staff and contract professionals

By Isaac Finn
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The University of Akron's Board of Trustees unanimously voted last Wednesday to eliminate 178 positions from the university, which is based in Northeast Ohio, in response to an expected decline in enrollment and continued budget shortfall. Out of the planned layoffs, 96 are full-time professors and members of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and 82 are staff and contract professionals.

The AAUP agreed to the layoffs as part of new labor agreement with the university. Management and the union are putting pressure on professors and other staff to accept the job-cutting deal in a vote, which must be completed by August 3.

In a statement released Friday night, University of Akron President Gary Miller threatened that failure to ratify the agreement would result in "legal battles" and "cause many, many more faculty to lose their jobs than were achieved through the recent board action."

The planned layoffs are the most recent attempt by the university to overcome its ongoing budget shortfall, which has worsened due to uncertainties caused by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. In 2018, the trustees voted to terminate 19 percent of the university's degree tracks, roughly 80 programs, in a cost cutting measure. Between 2010 and 2019, the number of faculty positions was cut by 18 percent. In May, the university announced plans to eliminate six out of its 11 colleges.

In late May, the AAUP announced that the university administration was attempting to invoke two clauses in their contract dealing with "unforeseen, uncontrolled and catastrophic circumstances" and "exigent circumstances." In a statement, the AAUP explained that the administration was claiming that these clauses

allow the university to suddenly fire faculty "without regard to tenure status, rank or the other criteria" and could seek to change agreements in the contract such as faculty pay, increase healthcare premiums, and eliminate healthcare benefits for dependents of retirees and furloughs.

If the union is successful in pushing through the plan to lay off professors, it would amount to giving the administration what it was asking for in May. The cuts would result in a 23 percent decline in the number of full-time unionized faculty since the start of the pandemic. Prior to the trustees vote on Wednesday, 21 full-time faculty resigned or retired. AAUP officials have also clarified that the recent names slated for layoffs were selected without protections for tenured or high-ranking faculty. The university currently employs about 570 full-time professors.

The university administration has claimed that termination of positions will save \$16.4 million, but it is estimating a roughly \$65 million budget shortfall, meaning more cuts are to come.

The tentative contract, which would run until the end of 2021, also includes pay cuts and raising healthcare premiums. Since the trustees approved contract extensions for the AAUP and two other unions, many workers at the university could experience pay cuts ranging from just under one percent to around four percent.

In a public relations nod to the AAUP, the University of Akron agreed to cut \$4.4 million from the university's sports budget. The AAUP, which accepts that university budget cuts are necessary, has claimed the sports program has been losing on average \$21.5 million per year and advocates for the university to

leave Division I of the National Collegiate Athletic Association.

By notifying the faculty that are slated for layoff, the university and the union are putting a gun to the heads of university workers to ratify the deal. Adding insult to injury, Akron-AAUP President Pam Schulze told the press that rejection of the contract would likely result in binding arbitration.

Miller has also said if the tentative contract was rejected the administration would invoke the “faculty retrenchment” clause in the current contract, which they had attempted to invoke in May. The clause would supposedly allow the immediate firing of faculty.

Despite the efforts to blackmail university workers, many faculty members and workers at the University of Akron and on other campuses have demonstrated a desire to fight against massive austerity and the reopening of schools under unsafe conditions.

Faculty members and their supporters have joined demonstrations against the layoffs. On July 2, roughly 150 joined a demonstration to oppose the firings in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Faculty also gathered outside of the Board of Trustees meeting on Wednesday.

On the same day as the Board of Trustees vote at Akron, faculty at Youngstown State University (YSU) overwhelmingly voted in favor of issuing a strike notice. The faculty at YSU, which like the University of Akron is part of the University System of Ohio, have expressed frustration with the sudden shift to remote learning and decision to lay off over 50 classified and professional staff this summer.

Similar cuts have been implemented outside of Ohio. This includes recent decisions by the University of Michigan-Flint to lay off almost 41 percent of lecturers; City University of New York’s plans to fire 2,800 adjuncts; and moves by Rutgers University to cut nearly 1,000 workers.

While many universities have sought to justify the cuts by citing ongoing budgetary issues combined with additional revenue losses from the COVID-19 pandemic, the response to the crisis exposes the class division within society. The CARES Act, which was passed overwhelmingly by Democratic and Republican politicians, has handed over trillions to Wall Street and the major corporations.

University of Akron workers should reject the sellout

deal pushed by the AAUP and build rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to unite workers in a struggle against the bipartisan austerity program. This must be combined with a political struggle against both corporate-controlled parties and the fight for socialism, including a radical redistribution of wealth to guarantee free, high quality education, the abolition of student debt and good-paying and secure jobs for university workers.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>