

# Who runs the University of Illinois?

By Brian Brown and James Martin  
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Four thousand maintenance, food service and other workers are continuing their strike at the University of Illinois at Chicago to demand adequate staffing levels, equipment to protect them against COVID-19 and wage increases for many workers who make below the city's minimum wage of \$14 an hour.

The UIC workers are engaged in a direct fight against the Democratic Party political machine in Chicago and the powerful corporate and financial interests it defends. In the face of this, the city unions have deliberately isolated the struggle and are seeking to starve workers into accepting a deal, which is in line with the savage austerity measures being prepared by state and local officials.

Last Friday, the Illinois Nurses Association (INA) ended the strike by 800 nurses at the University of Illinois Hospital, claiming it was near an agreement for "small wage increases" and the hiring of 200 nurses. Even if this comes to pass, it will do little to address the nurses' chief demands for safe staffing levels at one of the largest urban medical centers in the country. At least four nurses have died from COVID-19 at the facility.

As for the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) whose members are still on strike at the hospital and other UIC facilities, the union has not even provided them with strike pay, although SEIU Local 73 took in \$16.7 million in dues last year and handed over \$1 million to Democratic Toni Preckwinkle's failed bid for mayor in 2018.

The isolation of the strike must be broken, and the fight expanded. This means setting up a rank-and-file strike committee to demand adequate strike pay to sustain a real fight and to mobilize the working class throughout the city and state—teachers, workers at Ford, Amazon, UPS and other manufacturing and logistic companies—to defend the UIC workers.

In the University of Illinois Board of Trustees, workers are fighting a cabal of corporate titans, finance capital and Democratic Party politicians. The following is a selection of political profiles of the members of the UI board.

## Governor J.B. Pritzker

Illinois Democratic Governor J. B. Pritzker has a net worth of \$3.4 billion dollars. Pritzker is an heir to the Hyatt hotel family fortune, which extracted vast wealth by squeezing hotel workers into poverty and forcing many of them to go on strike in 2018. Pritzker is an *ex officio* member of the Board of Trustees but is a leading figure in shaping its policies, including the recent increase of university tuition by 1.8 percent.

The Democratic Party, which controls Illinois politics, is at the forefront of the attacks on the living standards of the working class

over multiple administrations. Last week, Pritzker ordered Illinois state agencies to prepare for a "nightmare scenario" with budget cuts of 5 to 10 percent if the state does not receive adequate federal aid.

Pritzker also reopened the state prematurely and now universities across the state are seeing a surge in COVID-19 cases. Pritzker's policies are not fundamentally different from Trump, who recently proclaimed that the virus must rip through the population.

## Donald J. Edwards, chairman of the board

Donald J. Edwards, chairman of the Board of Trustees, was appointed in 2017 by former Illinois Republican Governor Bruce Rauner and then reappointed by Pritzker in 2019. Edwards is a Democrat and the CEO of Flexpoint Ford LLC, a \$4 billion-plus private equity firm with a portfolio of investments in financial services and health care.

Edwards worked with former Governor Rauner at GTCR, a private-equity company, before founding his own firm. GTCR managed millions of pension funds of state employees in Illinois, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania and other states.

Edwards was also a top donor to former Chicago Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel, a former investment banker and chief of staff in the Obama administration. Emanuel left office widely hated by workers for his attacks on teachers and social services and coverup of the police murder of Laquan McDonald.

## Kareem Dale

Kareem Dale, a Democrat, currently serves as the director and senior counsel of Discover Financial Services. Under President Obama, Dale, who is blind, served as special assistant to the president for disability policy, which was the highest-ranking position on disability ever created.

Dale coordinated the outreach and support for the appointments of Supreme Court Justices Elena Kagan and Sonia Sotomayor, who were part of the unanimous 2017 Supreme Court ruling to allow portions of Trump's anti-immigrant travel ban. Before his appointment by President Obama, Dale worked over seven years as an attorney focusing on commercial litigation.

## Ramon Cepeda

Ramon Cepeda is The Northern Trust Company's senior vice president and managing director since 2007. Cepeda leads both the commercial real estate and professional services teams, which are responsible for providing capital and services to high net worth families and individuals investing in commercial real estate.

Cepeda is a member of the UI board's executive committee. According to the University of Illinois bylaws, "the executive meets on call of the chair or of any two members for the transaction of business that is urgent and cannot be postponed until the next regular meeting of the full board. The Executive Committee has all the powers of the Board of Trustees."

#### **Patricia Brown Holmes**

Patricia Brown Holmes, a Democrat, is also a member of the Board's executive committee. Holmes began her career as a prosecutor. In 1997, Holmes became an associate judge of the Circuit Court of Cook County. Currently, Holmes is managing director of the law firm Riley Safer Holmes & Cancila LLP.

Holmes focuses her practice within high-stakes commercial litigating, white-collar crime, and other legal counseling. In 2009, Holmes argued in front of the Supreme Court in the case *Black v United States* where she successfully defended an executive at the company Hollinger International Inc. against charges of mail fraud, tax evasion, and tax fraud.

In her role, Holmes has successfully defended countless multibillion-dollar companies against liability, fraud, and negligence cases. She was one of the leading lawyers who defended actor Jussie Smollett and has been a trusted partner to corporations and executives, defending top companies such as American Airlines, Amazon, etc.

#### **Dr. Stuart C. King**

Dr. Stuart C. King, a Republican, is a trained medical professional with a specialty in pain management. Dr. King was appointed in 2015 by Governor Bruce Rauner. He is the head of the Department of Spine and Pain Management at Christie Clinic, located in Champaign, Illinois. He is the chair of the University Healthcare System committee, which oversees the hospital and health sciences colleges administration and financial management. King, no doubt, plays a role in enforcing the low pay of health care workers at the UI hospital system.

#### **Ricardo Estrada**

Ricardo Estrada, a Democrat, was reappointed in 2019 by Pritzker. He previously served on the Board between 2011 and 2017. He was then appointed to the Cook County Hospital and Health System's board. Estrada is currently the CEO of the nonprofit Metropolitan Family Services.

#### **Jill B. Smart**

Jill B. Smart is the Chief Human Resource Officer at Accenture, a multinational Fortune Global 500 company. Currently, she is the president of The National Academy of Human Resources and a board member of EPAM Systems, AlixPartners and HireRight. Smart was head of human resources during the time Accenture underwent numerous layoffs.

Smart is a member of the University Healthcare System board that oversees the hospital administration. Smart has an estimated net worth of \$30.6 million, largely from her EPAM systems stock ownership.

#### **Avijit Ghosh**

Dr. Avijit Ghosh was appointed as permanent vice president, chief financial officer, and comptroller of the University of Illinois system. Ghosh served as the CEO of the University of Illinois Hospitals and Clinics at UIC.

During his time as CEO, the hospital saw its overall funding reduced. As chief financial officer, Ghosh briefed the board of trustees about the financial losses from COVID-19 and the expected loss the university would incur. At the same meeting, the board moved to limit refunds for UI students taking remote-only courses.

#### **Edward L. McMillan**

Edward L. McMillan, a Republican, was appointed in 2009. He is the CEO of McMillan LLC, a construction services firm, and is also the chairman of Illinois Ventures LLC, a venture capitalist firm that specializes in healthcare and technology. McMillan has a net worth of over \$1.6 million.

These are the corporate and political figures who are conducting the attack on nurses, university staff and students. They are similar to the University of Michigan Board of Regents, who sought an injunction to break the strike by 1,200 grad student instructors, and then relied on the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) to isolate and shut down the strike. Throughout the country, the rush to reopen the college campuses is being driven entirely by financial considerations, no matter how many students and college workers get sick and die.

To fight for their interests, nurses and university workers must take matters into their own hands and form rank-and-file strike committees, independent of the unions, to link up with the growing opposition of the working class across the country and internationally against the subordination of human life to corporate profit.

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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