

New Faculty Reflections on the Strike

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The following essays were written by two first-year faculty members in the English Department: Matt Vetter and Mary Stewart. We bonded immediately during the three-day IUP orientation in August, and have spent many moments in each other's office doorways, comparing notes about our new lives. By the time the strike occurred in October, it was only natural that we'd walk the picket line together. The three days the strike lasted also became an experience in community building, one we both reflect on in the following. We agree that having a cohort makes the navigation of major life changes far more pleasant, and we're grateful for the friendship that underscores our professional interactions. We also recognize the power and opportunity a strike provides, for building community and standing up for the values that community jointly holds. Given that, it only seemed appropriate to write and present these reflections together.

On Weariness, Privilege, and Community

Matt

When it became clear to me that we would, in fact, be hitting the picket lines to go on strike last October, one of my initial responses—because there were many—was simply weariness. I know. I'm too young to be weary, right? It's embarrassing even to write the word. I'm new here. I joined

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IUP's English department in August. We went on strike just a few months later. Is someone like me allowed to be weary?

I wonder. In trying to understand it now, I think of the weariness of an exhausting job search and, before that, the long journey towards academic credentials and sustainable employment in the humanities. Years of schooling; trying to make ends meet on a TA stipend; trying to raise a family and juggle the demands of academia; the weariness of finally starting the job I had dreamed about—and, only three months in, having to defend that job by going on strike.

It all sounds terribly narcissistic and maybe it is to some extent. But it was a weariness felt not just for my own journey—but for many others whose contributions to higher public education have been consistently met with budget cuts, salary freezes, furloughs, and other draconian measures that have gutted many of the great state systems of this country. A weariness felt for my friends and colleagues who, despite their good work and all the right credentials, could never secure employment that wasn't the exploitative and contingent life of an adjunct.

We live in a time when public education is both more expensive and more underfunded than ever before. Politicians openly mock students of the arts and humanities for pursuing worthless degrees. The neoliberal University—its precarious and contingent labor practices, skyrocketing tuition, exploitation of both students and faculty, and blind devotion to market logic—is no longer only a threat; it is a reality. Public education, for the majority of our politicians, if not those they represent, is seen as a public cost rather than a public good. So weariness, yes.

And weariness that is justified, yes, but also fleeting; for while weariness was there in the beginning, it was a feeling that was cut short by the strike itself. It was a feeling soon replaced with a sense of privilege and community. Yes, it is a privilege to be able to stand up for public education. It is a special privilege to stand from a faculty position. To have the opportunity to do meaningful work, and to be able to fight

for the conditions that are most conducive to our work. To show my students, without saying a word, what it means to take action for something you believe in.

And that weariness was also replaced with community, with camaraderie. My new colleagues walking the picket lines with me in the rain, actually having a few minutes to chat with them (as opposed to our normal schedules); students delivering donuts, sandwiches, hot coffee; one student delivering cigarettes; the IUP marching band staging an impromptu concert after being kicked off of their own quad; townspeople driving by, honking in support; more food; people out in the blistering cold—not weary but ready to do what it takes to protect education.

To be a part of a faculty union today, when right-to-work laws are becoming the new norm, when public education is seen as a public cost rather than a public good, is to take on the responsibility and the work of this fight. That comes with weariness, yes, but it also comes with marching bands, and donuts. It also comes with community.

The Things That Matter

Mary

The day we went on strike, I received my PhD diploma in the mail. I had walked across the stage just five months previously, in Davis, CA. Sitting in my living room in Indiana, PA, I excitedly drew the sheet out of the cardboard folder. It was misspelled. It read, Mary K. Stewart, PhD in “writing, thetoric, and comparison studies.” Thetoric. “Comparison studies” is also wrong—it should be “composition studies.” But at least comparison is a word.

The intensity of the previous year collapsed into that not-a-word word. I wrote my job applications from a hospital waiting room, finished my dissertation on planes in between interviews, and eventually drove the 3,915 miles, through 12 states, to reach my new home. So, yes, as my colleague Matt

writes, I was weary.

In some ways, the strike was just one more thing to learn about and adjust to, like the bizarre PA liquor laws and the impending winter. Some colleagues seemed fearful and worried—you'd better save up, they said. Others seemed to take it in stride—contract negotiations often include strike threats, they said, and even if we do go on strike, it won't be for long. Still others seemed angry and rearing for a fight—the board has it out for us, they said, they're trying to break the union. Was this normal? Just another element that would eventually contribute to my new identity as a Pennsylvanian? I wasn't sure which reaction made the most sense, and it took some time to think through where I stood on the issues.

In other ways, the strike was an incredible reinforcement of my long-felt sense of belonging in the academic community. Walking the picket line, we talked about the things we loved—our work, our students, and our ability to stand for something true and right. I was unsurprised, but still astounded, by the dedicated people who were my new colleagues. I was proud to stand on the corner and publicly declare my support for high-quality higher education. But, mostly, I was delighted to find that, even though I was far from California, and I was weary from the past year, I was home.

I mailed my degree in Thetoric back to UC Davis and a kind woman had it fixed right away. No big deal. Parsing through the larger political and social issues surrounding the strike will be a longer process, and that's okay. Those three days in October affirmed that IUP is a place where people are willing to fight for the things that matter. The strike was a strange introduction to this new job, but, if anything, it only affirmed that I made the right decision. I believe our responsibility as educators and scholars is to question and consider and debate the tough issues, and I'm grateful to have joined a community that is willing to seriously enter into those conversations.



APSCUF Sets Strike Date, Will Not Walk Out if State System Negotiates Fair Contract

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Faculty members will go on strike Oct. 19, unless the Association of Pennsylvania State College and University Faculty and the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education reach a contract agreement that is fair to students and faculty. APSCUF will not strike if the State System negotiates a fair contract.

President Dr. Kenneth M. Mash, flanked by APSCUF members, announced the date this morning in a press conference that aired on Facebook Live. Journalists also attended the event in person at Red Lion Hotel Harrisburg Hershey in Swatara Township, Dauphin County.

“The State System has asked for tens of millions more in concessions from faculty than they have from anyone else,”

Mash said. “Faculty offered a major healthcare concession, but the State System did not change their offer. We sat with them for days, and they gave us a proposal that purposely went backward. They are intent on hurting educational quality, rewarding themselves while simultaneously cutting the salaries of our lowest-paid members by 20 percent, and balancing their books off the backs of their students and our faculty. We will not be a party to it. Period.”

The State System did not agree to APSCUF’s proposal to enter binding arbitration, during which a three-person panel could conclude the contract dispute. Earlier this week, the State System sent APSCUF a formal announcement that it wants to undergo nonbinding fact-finding with a Pennsylvania Labor Relations Board arbitrator. The board did not grant the State System’s request. APSCUF prefers binding arbitration because it would bring the entire matter to a conclusion, Mash said.

In the past week, APSCUF’s negotiations team met five days with the State System. Today and tomorrow, APSCUF leadership and delegate members from all 14 State System campuses are meeting for the organization’s regularly scheduled legislative assembly in Harrisburg. When that concludes Saturday, a strike-training workshop will commence. APSCUF plans to resume talks with the State System in October, after these previously scheduled events. APSCUF is waiting for the State System to respond to the five dates the association offered to negotiate next.

“We will continue to go to the table in an earnest attempt to negotiate a fair deal. It is time for the State System to do the same,” Mash said. “The clock is ticking.”

APSCUF objects to State System proposals that would affect the quality of education faculty members could provide

to their students. Such proposals would, among other issues:

- Increase the number of temporary faculty and lead to reductions in permanent faculty who are in a better position to devote themselves to their students.
- Allow students to be taught by new graduate students — new college graduates — instead of faculty with advanced degrees.
- Cut funding for faculty scholarship and professional development that allows faculty to bring current knowledge to students.
- Give university presidents unilateral authority to transfer faculty members to other departments

APSCUF represents about 5,500 faculty and coaches at the State System universities: Bloomsburg, California, Cheyney, Clarion, East Stroudsburg, Edinboro, Indiana, Kutztown, Lock Haven, Mansfield, Millersville, Shippensburg, Slippery Rock, and West Chester Universities of Pennsylvania.

* This release has been updated to reflect the Pennsylvania Labor Relations Board's decision.

