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Unions protest as day 600 with no contract nears

Managing Editor Bruce Darnell
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Union protestors walked up the stairway to the second floor of the Morris University Center carrying their signs before entering the room where the Feb. 8 meeting was held.

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Members, representatives and supporters of AFSCME Local 2887 and Local 2232 gathered to protest the continued lack of a new contract on Feb. 8, 2024 in the Morris University Center.

The protest began at 10 a.m., which is around the time the Board of Trustees meeting opens to the public.

A crowd gathered in the main lobby of the MUC. The crowd was composed of a variety of people: members and supporters of SIUE's AFSCME unions and their partners, members and leaders of nearby unions, such as the AFL-CIO and students.

Speaking prominently was Eddie Caumiant, regional director with AFSCME Council 31. Caumiant stepped on top of a bench to give an initial speech to the crowd and told them what to expect in the meeting.

After the speech, the crowd moved up to the second floor of the MUC and went into the room where the meeting would take place.



Illinois AFL-CIO President Tim Drea opens the meeting by talking to the board and expressed shock at how long the union has gone without a contract.

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The Board of Trustees meetings have changed their structure. Speakers are given the opportunity to speak before the chancellor. Up first was an outside supporter of the union's efforts, Illinois AFL-CIO President Tim Drea.

"We all have one core principle, and that is to work with dignity and respect," Drea said. "We negotiate contracts up and down this state ... To my knowledge, there is not one collective bargaining agreement in Illinois — other than this one — that's gone 588 days without resolution."

Drea said he wanted to remind the board that 2.2 million voters supported the Illinois Workers' Rights Amendment in November 2022. The bill guarantees workers the ability to collectively bargain with their employers.

"The people of Illinois believe in workers' rights," Drea said. "This is more than a union and management struggle. This is a

struggle for nearly every person who leaves for work and kisses their loved one goodbye in the morning ... Again, it's all about dignity and respect at the job."

"You cannot succeed in teaching the leaders of tomorrow by stepping on the backs of the workers you employ at this university. They're going to stand up and tell you, 'We're tired of

excuses and delay. We want a fair contract now.”

After Drea, Southwestern Illinois Central Labor Council President Scot Luchtefeld spoke at the podium.

“There was a time in this community when a non-teaching job at SIUE was considered a solid prospect ... Now the only stories we hear are about chronic understaffing, wages near or below minimum wage and mothers doing more work while taking on multiple jobs to support their families,” Luchtefeld said.

Luchtefeld said the administration has been hostile to the workers over the past few years. He said their attendance at the meeting was to remind administration who they work for besides students.



A trio of protestors sitting in the back of the Legacy Room in the Morris University Center listening to speaker Tim Drea, president of the Illinois AFL-CIO.

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“Your reputation matters,” Luchtefeld said.

“That historic word on the street about SIU has become, ‘Can you believe those poor workers have gone three years — three years! — without a contract? How is a university job only worth minimum wage?’ and, perhaps most troubling, ‘I used to believe in SIU, but this situation has made me question that.’”

Luchtefeld then brought up how the Staff Senate supported the union workers during their meeting on Feb. 6. He concluded his speech reiterating the importance of resolving the negotiations before the upcoming deadline of Feb. 29.

Victor Ludwig, SIUC’s student trustee, took time right after the speech to show his support for the workers and their negotiation process, to which he received applause from the crowd of union supporters.



“I also feel it’s been too long that the workers have gone without a contract and it’s been far, far too long since they’ve had a fair contract,” Ludwig said. “I don’t want to be at a university where I have to look at the people who serve me and know that they cannot afford what they need to

survive.”



Chancellor James T. Minor listens to a speech about the Student Opportunities for Academic Results, or SOAR, program whilst a protestor holds up a sign.

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After the opening speeches, the meeting went on as normal. The schools under the SIU system gave reports on incoming students and future plans they have for their institutions.

When it became Chancellor James Minor's turn to speak, he was interrupted by hecklers in the audience at some moments throughout his report.

Minor brought up SIUE's campus food pantries, which is called Cougar Cupboard. The pantries are funded by the Meridian Society and are created by student volunteers.

After mentioning an expansion to the pantries, AFSCME Local 2887 President Julie LaTempt-Brazier yelled from the audience that some faculty have to eat from these pantries because they cannot afford food.

Near the end of his report, Minor mentioned adjustments to the SIUE



commitment program to make college more affordable and accessible to families nearby.

After this, multiple people in the crowd began to speak, to which Board Chair J. Phil Gilbert slammed his gavel at the table and told the crowd to hold their comments.

When the meeting concluded, the crowd began to chant, "What do we want? Fair Contracts! When do we want it? Now!"

This chant continued as the crowd walked down the stairs to the lobby of the MUC. Here, Caumiant gave a closing speech.

"We will win this fight with your help," Caumiant said. "Thank you to all of our community partners who were out here today. Thank you brothers and sisters for coming today. We will make a difference with our solidarity."

The protest continued later in the evening, as the crowd regathered in St. Louis at a fundraiser held by Chancellor Minor in an attempt to get the attention of SIUE donors.

The next Board of Trustees meeting will be held March 28, 2024 in Springfield, Illinois.



Regional Director with AFSCME Council 31 Eddie Caumiant delivers a speech to an audience of union protestors about the importance of their solidarity and what comes next after this protest.

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After leaving the meeting, the protestors began to do a chant throughout the Morris University Center, saying, "What do we want? Fair Contracts! When do we want it? Now!"

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