

The Indiana University Student Strike

April 21, 2013

The Indiana University (IU) student strike of April 11-12, 2013, was an important milestone in new student activism.

Strike activities drew 400 active participants on the main campus of the IU system in Bloomington. While this may not seem like much compared to total enrollment of 40,000, this is a misleading comparison. Four hundred activists has to be considered significant given not only the general dearth of student activism at present, but given also the reality of March Madness—the NCAA men’s basketball tournament in which the Bloomington team had been a major contender and which, in basketball-fanatic Indiana, has been an overweening preoccupation. From the original 300 dispatched into 15 strike rally teams on the 11th, the number was augmented by another 100 as the teams fanned throughout the campus, and, according to reports, many students cheered on the strikers from dorm and classroom windows. Even a local fraternity house sported a strike support banner, as did Boxcar Books, the local independent alternative bookstore that’s long been a community Mecca for activists and counter-culturalists.

The IU strike also sparked solidarity actions at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the University of Michigan, and the strikers received statements of support from many other campuses. Hunter Teaches, an organization of adjunct professors at New York City’s Hunter College, also supported the strike, as did the University of California San Diego Student Union.

The strike organizers considered what they’d done as successful. Six months in building, the strike was first called for and organized at a meeting of about 50 people on December 5, 2012, and was originally planned to be an IU system-wide strike of several campuses throughout the state. Nevertheless, most activity in fact was confined to the Bloomington campus, though there were small related actions on the IU South Bend campus, as well as at IUPUI, Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis.

Strikers were unfazed by the forcible dispersal from a university building by IU and Bloomington police of a group of students who’d gathered there in a General Assembly for strike planning. The strikers denounced the “chaos” caused by the police as unnecessary and unprovoked, though one student was arrested, allegedly for vandalism. (There was also one other arrest, of someone actually hostile to the strike, of which more below.)

150 strike participants also tried to attend the IU Board of Trustees meeting, but were effectively shut out. The strike had been called to coincide with the Board of Trustees’ meeting of April 11-12 (truncated to only April 11, allegedly for lack of items on the agenda and not the strike), at which on the agenda was yet another proposed tuition hike. The Bloomington campus alone has seen a 45% rise in tuition costs in the past six years, and at present the average IU graduate leaves the university with \$27,000 in debt and very uncertain job prospects.

But protest over rising tuition costs was only one of the six demands raised by the strike. The official six demands were:

1. “Immediately reduce tuition and eliminate fees.” Student tuition now accounts for 51% of IU’s operating budget, with a major drop in state funding by Indiana’s legislature, which now provides only 18% of the budget, projected to drop to only 10% by 2020; this, of course, effectively makes college unattainable for many Indiana residents. Full-time undergraduate in-

state tuition is now \$10,034 annually, while out-of-state is \$31,484 annually.

2. "Stop privatization and outsourcing at IU." The IU bookstore is already privatized to the Barnes & Noble chain, which resulted in the planned closing of the independent Friends of Art bookstore on campus, which for 45 years has been providing books on art and graphics, on the grounds that it violates the contractual agreement with Barnes & Noble. Plans are also under consideration to privatize parking on the Bloomington and IUPUI campuses, as well as to make the University more "competitive" in commercial exploitation of research through further extension of corporate-friendly policies and licensing of faculty research results. Further outsourcing of university services to private businesses is also possible.
3. "End the wage freeze." IU staff employees are among the lowest paid in the Big Ten, while administrators consistently get hefty raises. To cut costs, IU is relying more and more on graduate students and underpaid adjunct professors, with concomitant reduction in academic quality. The School of Continuing Education has been radically downsized, further limiting opportunities for working people to pursue a college education. From the beginning worker outreach was a major activity of the strike organizers, despite the no-strike pledge that bound the unionized staff (principally Communications Workers of America [CWA], with a smaller number represented by AFSCME) and the hostility to worker strike participation expressed by the union leaders themselves. Yet, at the time of the strike, many IU workers were reported to be watching sympathetically and cheering the strikers on.
4. "The university must honor its promise to double its enrollment of African-American students to 8%." At present, persons of color make up only 4% of the Bloomington campus body, down considerably from the 1976 high-water mark. A diversity rally was also held in conjunction with the strike at noon on April 12, and issues of race and racism were part of the alternative Free University classes held in campus buildings as part of the strike, led by graduate students and faculty and open to the general public, not just to IU students.
5. "Abolish both HB1402 and SB590." HB1402, not yet become law, would require undocumented students to pay out-of-state tuition, while SB590, which is law, is an Arizona-style anti-immigration measure.
6. "No retaliation for participating in or organizing for the strike." But sympathetic faculty were warned by administrators not to use campus listserves or e-mails to organize for the strike (rescinded shortly after release) or cancel classes, and students participating in the strike have received no assurances against retaliation. On April 1 a group of strike supporters entered Provost and Executive Vice President Lauren Robel's office, during which Provost Robel alleged her administrative assistant was pushed (the strike supporters denied this); a few days later Provost Robel circulated on campus a sanctimonious e-mail demanding strikers' absolute adherence to nonviolence. This e-mail was answered not only by members of the History Department, but also by a blogger who pointedly noted on the "IU on Strike!" Tumblr blog that Robel was conflating disruption with violence. A letter of support for the strike was also circulated by a group of social work students, one of whom noted that she was graduating \$23,000 in debt (which actually makes her one of the lucky ones, since this is below the average debt of IU students).

The strike drew significant media coverage from its early days of organizing on (see the list below). Throughout the whole of the strike period, from the beginning organizing efforts on, there was extensive media interest by writers for the campus paper, the *Indiana Daily Student (IDS)*, though the paper itself took no position on the strike, and media inquiries and requests for interviews came from as far away as Taiwan. The media interest caught the strike organizers and activists somewhat off-guard, and often the only response, as posted on the "STUDENT POWER IU" Facebook page, set up specifically as an organizing aid for discussion among the organizers and participants, was a plaintive "Anyone out there want to handle this?" Interest was also expressed by student government activists, dorm residency councils, and other campus bodies.

And despite the unions' official hostility, the IU strike did garner significant labor support. South Central Indiana Jobs with Justice, headquartered in Bloomington, officially endorsed the strike, and Central Indiana Jobs with Justice, headquartered in Indianapolis, favorably publicized the protests of IUPUI students and staff against privatization of parking. Bruce Smedley, retired president of CWA Local 4730, the IU staff union, wrote a letter to the *Herald-Times* enthusiastically endorsing the strike and calling on the IU workers to have the "crimson flu" and call in sick during the strike. The newly-formed Indiana chapter of the IWW also endorsed and participated in the strike, and was an active organizing force for the strike, as many of the strike organizers were also IWW members.

The strike organizers used new social media well, in my opinion. In addition to the above-mentioned "STUDENT POWER IU" Facebook page and the "IU on Strike!" Tumblr blog, there was also the "IU on Strike" Facebook page for postings not directly related to strike organizing, as well as the community-based "Noms for the IU STRIKE" Facebook page, all of which were organized by strike activists. The Progressive Faculty and Staff Caucus also had a Facebook page for organizing, "IU Progressive Faculty and Staff." After the strike, a group independent of the actual strikers founded a Facebook page, "Silent Strike IU," to circulate a petition and serve as a discussion forum for tuition reform. Further, the strikers used Tumblr and PDF format effectively to circulate posters and flyers that others could download, print off and circulate.

As for the above-mentioned arrest of someone hostile to the strike, that person was Alex Carlisle, a right-wing opinion writer for the *IDS*, who tweeted "Kill Provost Robel" attached to a re-tweet of a communication from "IU on Strike," which he said he did sarcastically, and, at the urging of Provost Robel herself, had charges against him dropped; although he is now under investigation by the *IDS* itself for violation of journalistic ethics. The strikers themselves, while glad Carlisle was released and not charged (after all, it is a free speech issue), vigorously castigated him on "STUDENT POWER IU," noting his "Breitbartian pseudo-journalism" and how he was an "IU-scaled Rush Limbaugh."

When I was visiting Bloomington last February, I picked up at Boxcar Books a free copy of a valuable undated pamphlet, "Rebellion at Indiana University: historical notes," which contains articles from the *Indiana Alumni Magazine*, the *IDS* and statements and leaflets issued by activists delineating IU-Bloomington's rich history of protest and demonstrations, from opposition to the Kennedy Administration's 1962 blockade of Cuba to the November 29, 2011 protest of JPMorgan-Chase's recruiting of business school students for employment in the wake of Wall Street's complicity in the recession, with a final earlier statement calling for the April strike. Included in here are accounts of the 1969 student strike against tuition hikes (an ever-recurring event at IU, it seems) and the May 6, 1970 anti-Vietnam War demonstration in the wake of the Kent State killings. Not included, though it deserves mentioning, is the attempt to jail three members of the Young Socialist Alliance chapter at IU for "subversion" and "advocating the violent overthrow of the government," which the three YSAers eventually won.

But while the organizers overwhelmingly did an excellent job in my opinion, and the strike definitely has to be regarded as a success, I must express disquiet at a certain paranoid and manipulative attitude toward the independent press which I encountered as a freelance reporter. I noted this to one of the organizers, citing in my defense as an independent but friendly journalist, C. Wright Mills' comment "I have tried to be objective. I do not claim to be detached;" and Rosa Luxemburg's, "[I]t is a well-known and indisputable fact that without a free and untrammelled press, without the unlimited right of association and assemblage, the rule of the broad mass of the people is entirely unthinkable." However, I was dismissively regarded as citing credentials the strikers didn't care about. (It's also a limitation of the striking students themselves, though overwhelmingly an impressive lot, several of whom are now Facebook Friends, that they didn't seem to know who Mills and Luxemburg were.) Also, the strikers relied, in my opinion, too much on Occupy-style

General Assemblies and spontaneous “autonomous” actions for organizing, as well as overrating the effectiveness of Facebook and other social media for organizing—this last something the strikers themselves have admitted.

But I regard these as minor quibbles over what was overall a very effective action given the necessary limitations of these particular times, and am glad for the opportunity to lend my journalistic hand in this effort to build an effective new student activist movement. And I am so glad that, as an IU alumnus myself, my Alma Mater now has something notable and deserving of acclaim other than basketball.

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Note: Here are some of the articles and commentary on the strike:

Levi Rafael, “Campus Wide Strike at Indiana University,” *Socialist Organizer*, Jan. 2, 2013.

“Dispatches from the U.S. Student Movement,” *The Nation*, Jan. 18, 2013.

George Fish, “Indiana University system-wide student strike being organized,” *Examiner.com*, Jan. 27, 2013.

“What You Need to Know About the Indiana University Strike,” *The Nation*, April 8, 2013.

“IU on Strike,” *The Nation*, April 11, 2013.

Rebecca Burns, “Indiana University on Strike against Tuition Hikes,” *In These Times*, April 12, 2013.

Anonymous, “Tales from the IU Strike,” *Remaking the University* blog by Michael Meranze and Christopher Newfield.

Emily Loftis, “Indiana University Student-Led Strike,” *Storify*, April 15, 2013 (replete with numerous color photos and tweets from strike participants).