

Graduate students strike at the University of Michigan

A correspondent
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Graduate Student Instructors (GSIs) at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, members of the Graduate Employees Organization (GEO), an affiliate of the Michigan Federation of Teachers, staged a strike on March 10 and 11 in protest over the administration's unwillingness to bargain in good faith after nearly four months of negotiations.

On the first day of the strike over 500 GEO members participated in picket lines around campus and many more GSIs canceled classes. The union has tentatively scheduled an open-ended strike for March 16.

The strike has received support from much of the administrative and maintenance staff and from the faculty, many of whom have canceled classes altogether or held classes off-campus. Thousands of undergraduates also boycotted their lectures and sections. The GEO picket lines also received support from the laid-off workers at the *Detroit News / Free Press*. Many delivery drivers have refused to make deliveries to the university or curtailed their deliveries in response to the picket lines.

At issue are wages and work hours. The university administration has refused to negotiate on wage issues at all, offering a 2.5 percent pay raise over three years as opposed to the GEO's demand for a 9 percent increase over the same period. Currently GSIs are paid according to a percentage of a 40-hour week. A .5 assignment means that an instructor would be required to work 20 hours a week; a .4 appointment, 16 hours. Union negotiators have noted that GSIs routinely work more than the designated percentage of hours: .5 appointees from 20 to 25 hours and .4 appointees from 17 to 19 hours weekly as opposed to a mandated 16. Instructors in language courses frequently work an even more disproportionate number of hours.

The university has offered to make all .4 appointees

.5 appointees, but has not addressed the issue of working hours. Because of this, and because the university's proposal addresses only a third or less of GSIs, the GEO has rejected this.

The GEO is further asking for compensation for the three-week summer seminar that International Graduate Student Instructors are required to take before they begin teaching in the fall. A verbal agreement made in 1996 resulted in a promise to deliver a stipend of \$700 per international student for rent and necessities. Fewer than 20 percent of International GSIs were compensated in the following years.

Because these students are not yet instructors, and so not a part of the GEO bargaining unit, the university has refused to address their issues as a part of the contract, although it has offered unofficially a very small stipend plus accommodation in the university dormitories "according to need." Also of concern to the union, although the GEO is not striking on the issue, is discrimination in university hiring practices for women and minority graduates students.

GSIs (called teaching assistants at most institutions) are among the most exploited workers in the academia. At the University of Michigan they teach over 50 percent of the classes, do nearly all the grading, and yet are paid an average of \$1,133 a month. With the high cost of living in the Ann Arbor area, this means that an average 42 percent of a GSI's income goes to pay rent. GSIs have no job security and live from year to year or semester to semester without knowing if they will be able to continue their education or support themselves.

In addition to this, young academics very often have few job prospects when they graduate. Even with a faculty appointment, job security on American universities is a vanishing right, and it is not uncommon for people in their forties to be unsure, not

only if they will have a job from year to year, but even what part of the country they'll be living in.

The WSWs spoke to students and faculty about the strike. One overseas student on the picket line said: "It's very hard to live on a GSI's income because you're working and not just being a student. You have none of the things that other working people have, and you're not treated like a worker. I'm supposed to work 18 hours a week, but I put in 20 to 25 hours, or even more sometimes. The amount of money we get is not reasonable for the amount of work that we do.

"I'm an International GSI and I feel strongly about the issue of compensation for the summer seminar. I don't think the administration really appreciates what a big deal it is to come here from another country. I do like how some of the faculty have responded to our strike. Two professors from my department were on the picket line. One of them canceled a class of over 300 students. I was very proud of them.

"I think it's very unhealthy to accept the existing situation where people who do the same kind of work get paid differently. I'm from a country where there's a very different attitude toward the distribution of wealth. A better distribution of wealth creates a big difference in the way people relate to each other. It makes people feel more respected."



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