

Graduate student instructors walk out at University of Michigan

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The University of Michigan Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO), which represents 1,600 graduate student instructors (GSIs), held a one-day walkout on Monday, March 11, to force the University administration to yield in ongoing contract negotiations. The union is holding out on a number of issues, including better wages and improved child-care provisions.

Graduate employees perform a number of jobs for universities—including teaching classes, conducting lab sessions, and grading—generally in return for partial or full tuition grants as well as a regular income. At the University of Michigan, GSIs teach 22 percent of classes offered to undergraduates. As they hold office hours and direct labs, they supervise roughly half of undergraduates' instructional time. The average GSI works between 16 and 22 hours a week over the course of an academic year, with a median salary of \$12,800 plus tuition grants. Lower-paid GSIs routinely take out loans to make ends meet.

Negotiations have been proceeding extremely slowly since January, as the administration has argued that GEO demands were either too expensive or unnecessary. On March 7, the membership voted to hold a one-day walkout March 11.

In eleventh-hour negotiations, the university reached agreement on several of the minor demands, mainly dealing with legal issues. They agreed to define the term "graduate student," to incorporate elements of the Michigan legal code dealing with on-the-job harassment in the GEO contract, and to include affirmative action language in the contract.

However, the university did not agree to any of the substantive demands, those the GEO membership had identified as ones of highest concern. The GEO is asking for a minimum increase in wages of 4.5 to 5

percent per year over the next three years, while the university has presented a below inflation offer of 2 percent per year, representing a cut in real wages over the next three years. The graduate instructors are also seeking a contract that equalizes pay across different "fractions" of employment. Presently, instructors who are not fully employed with the university receive a lower hourly wage (as low as \$10.84 per hour) in addition to receiving lower tuition grants and health-care services.

The other main issue still on the table concerns access to child care. Many of the instructors are single parents, and the average cost of child care in the area is \$800 a month. The GEO is seeking an automatic stipend of \$2,000 per semester (half year) for any GSI parent. It is also asking that the university commit to increasing available health care. The union backed down on its earlier demand for the construction of a 24-hour day-care facility on the university that would be available for all GSIs.

Monday's strike drew about 500 union members and received support from several hundred undergraduates as well as workers involved in construction projects on campus. Construction at one building was halted for the day, as workers refused to cross GEO picket lines, and work at other sites was also disrupted.

GEO organizing committee member Rachel Meyer said, "We are really happy with the turnout today ... I think we've done a good job shutting down the university." The union had asked undergraduates to join in a one-day boycott of all university buildings, however almost all classes went on as scheduled and the university has said that the losses from the one-day strike have not been severe. GEO President Cedric de Leon anticipated that negotiations with the university would not proceed smoothly after the one-day walkout,

and the GEO is currently planning an open-ended strike for next week.

The action at the University of Michigan is part of a broader trend toward unionization of graduate and even undergraduate employees. At the University of Illinois, graduate employees are planning a strike for next month, which would be their second walkout of the year. Columbia University students are discussing plans to unionize, and earlier this year resident assistants at the University of Massachusetts received attention by being the first group of undergraduate students to unionize.

On the one hand, this trend is part of a move by the AFL-CIO to cultivate support within the student population as its base among broader sections of the working class continues to deteriorate due its pro-business policies. The union bureaucracy has actively sought to create unions on college campuses, and most of these new organizations are affiliated with the AFL-CIO, including the University of Michigan GEO.

At the same time, a section of the student population is becoming increasingly radicalized, especially as tuition prices soar and job prospects diminish in the wake of an economic downturn. This is reflected in moves to seek higher wages and better conditions from universities, both private and public.

The trend had been confined until recently to public schools, since graduate employees at private universities had been barred from organizing by the National Labor Relations Board. This changed in 2000, when the board agreed to allow some students at New York University to unionize. Universities have generally opposed any attempts to organize, arguing that graduate students are students and not employees, and therefore have no right to unionize.



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