

University of Michigan lecturers stage one-day walkout

A WSWS reporter
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The University of Michigan Lecturers' Employee Organization (LEO) staged a one-day walkout on Thursday, April 8. The union is in the midst of negotiating its first contract with the administration. The lecturers are seeking higher wages and better job security, among other grievances.

The LEO (a branch of the American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO) includes some 1,600 lecturers at University of Michigan (U of M) campuses in Ann Arbor, Flint and Dearborn. Lecturers are non-tenure-track faculty who make substantially less than full professors and have none of the job security. They are generally hired for one-semester or one-year contracts and can be laid off at the end of this period without cause or notice. Lecturers at the university of Michigan receive as little as \$20,000 a year or less, with an average salary between \$24,000 and \$37,000, depending on the campus.

LEO is seeking to implement multiyear contracts and is asking for a minimum full-time salary rate of \$40,000 at all three campuses. It is seeking mandatory salary increases for returning lecturers and a provision that would ensure that lecturers who have been employed for more than two years could not be laid off without cause.

The university provoked the strike after refusing to make any serious concessions on the main issues of wages and job security. At the same time, the provosts of the university have sought to intimidate the lecturers by threatening them with legal action for the walkout. An email sent by the administrations of the campuses to deans and department chairs a week before the strike stated, "Any withholding of work by public employees—including the refusal to teach classes—is a violation of state law." It strongly urged all faculty to continue with classes as scheduled.

The antidemocratic state legislation is a violation of the fundamental right of workers to unionize and engage in work stoppages. According to U of M lecturer and LEO member Ian Robinson, "The Michigan law ... is a blanket prohibition accompanied by no procedural or substantive safeguards. As such, it is a violation of our human rights as workers."

As part of a nationwide trend, U of M has increasingly relied on lecturers and graduate students to teach classes. Over the past several decades, major universities in the United States such as U of M have more and more emphasized research as opposed to teaching. It is research that brings in the corporate and government grants that have become a major source of university funding as state financing declines. University administrators have been under particular pressure to cut costs in recent years as education funding from state governments has been cut in the face of massive budget deficits.

According to the union, over 25 percent of the Ann Arbor faculty is non-tenure-track (NTT), with only 50 percent of undergraduate credits being taught by full professors. At the other U of M campuses over 50 percent of the teaching is done by NTT faculty.

The union made an appeal to students at the university to not attend classes for one day. The lecturers have argued that students would benefit from a better paid and more secure teaching staff, as this would improve the quality of classes. Currently lecturers must take on a heavy course load or even take second jobs to get by, resulting in a decline in time available for students. Strikers reported that activity at the university was substantially diminished for the day. In addition to many students, construction and other workers employed by the university refused to cross picket lines in solidarity with the lecturers.

Negotiations were scheduled to resume on Friday, April 9.



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