

Illinois teaching and research assistants strike

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Hundreds of graduate student employees at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, went out on strike on Monday.

After a rally at 7:45 a.m. on Monday morning, graduate employees and their supporters established pickets around a number of campus buildings. The pickets continued throughout the day. Many professors and undergraduate students refused to cross the lines, either canceling classes or convening off campus.

A teaching assistant told the *World Socialist Web Site* that most undergraduates did not attend classes, and the few who did found their buildings and classrooms empty. She said that as many as 1,000 people joined the picket lines.

Last week, 92 percent of teaching assistants (TAs) and research assistants (RAs) participating in a strike authorization ballot voted in favor of striking.

The University Board of Trustees then called for last minute negotiations with the Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO), an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). These broke down on Saturday over the university's refusal to guarantee tuition waivers for out-of-state graduate students.

The central issue in the strike is pay. TAs and RAs make little money—a minimum of \$13,430 for nine months—even though they carry out a significant proportion of the university's instruction and research. Many graduate student employees must support families on this stipend, which excludes medical coverage for spouses and children.

Saturday's negotiations resulted in a tentative agreement to raise the minimum stipend by less than \$1,400 by the third year of the contract, to \$14,820. This is far less than the \$16,086 the GEO originally demanded, and might not keep pace with inflation, possibly locking TAs and RAs into de facto year-over-year pay cuts.

The GEO further claims that the university is refusing

to include in the contract a guarantee that in the coming years TAs and RAs will receive tuition waivers, which is generally standard practice at universities for graduate employees. If university administrators are able to impose tuition costs on TAs and RAs, it would effectively wipe out the meager wages these workers receive.

By its refusal to guarantee tuition waivers, the university administration is seeking a contract that will give it a free hand to enact deeper pay cuts disguised as tuition increases.

A new round of negotiations is scheduled this morning.

“The administration doesn't just want to freeze our wages,” a striking teaching assistant told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “They view graduate employees as a new stream of revenue,” she noted, referring to the fact that the university wants to hold on to the possibility of charging TAs and RAs tuition.

In contrast, the university's administration pays itself in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. Its recently resigned president and chancellor, Joseph White and Richard Herman, were paid \$555,000 and \$427,000, respectively, in 2007-2008. White's salary that year was about 40 times that of the current TA-RA minimum.

White and Herman each resigned this year after it was revealed that their offices had sought to secure admission for the children of politically-connected families in the state.

Looming behind the strike is the global economic crisis.

While the University of Illinois' budget survived relatively unscathed this year, it is acknowledged that there will be a major falloff in funding beginning next year, a result of the fiscal crisis of the state of Illinois, one of the worst in the country.

Illinois has the second largest state budget deficit,

which is estimated at \$13.2 billion—second only to California’s at \$46 billion.

The university administration, in line with an assault underway on wages, social benefits, and education across the country, is intent on pushing the cost of the economic crisis onto its employees and undergraduates through tuition increases.

The cost of going to the University of Illinois for students who reside in the state is now more than \$20,000 per year. While incoming freshmen faced an increase of “only” 2.6 percent this year, this is bound to increase rapidly in the coming years given the condition of the state’s economy.

These basic facts demonstrate that the struggle of the University of Illinois TAs and RAs is not merely an isolated contest between graduate students and the administration.

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The university’s workforce and students cannot be allowed to pay the price for the financial crisis. The broadest possible appeal must be made to the undergraduates and other sections of the university workforce—professors, secretaries, and maintenance and food workers—and the local community for joint action. These are the natural allies of the graduate employees.

Democratic Party politicians and the parent unions, the Illinois Federation of Teachers (IFT) and the AFT, are not.

Standing behind the administration is the state Democratic Party, which controls the Board of Trustees through appointments and which, as the scandal involving Herman and White made clear, maintains intimate ties with top administrators. The Democrats, which have a majority in the state legislature and the governorship, will prepare the coming years’ austerity budgets. University administrators are mindful of these looming cuts in their current contract negotiations with the GEO.

The IFT and AFT will intervene to short circuit any struggle that threatens their own ties to the Democratic Party. Their primary concern is to see the Illinois graduate employees, one of their largest locals in Illinois, under contract and paying dues. In the last round of negotiations, the IFT applied pressure to GEO negotiators to accept a bad contract, telling them that it was a good start for a “first contract.”

At the national level, after funneling millions of dollars into the election of Barack Obama and Democratic congressmen, the AFT and its rival, the National Education Association (NEA), have fallen in line behind education secretary Arne Duncan’s “Race to the Top” initiative for public education, whose aim is to broaden merit pay, standardized testing, and charter schools. These are the very same policies the education unions opposed under the Bush administration.

All over the US, tuition has been increased to record levels, and the pay and jobs of university workers cut. Justifying these actions is the incessant refrain that there is simply no money.

This is a lie.

The Obama administration’s appropriation for the funding of higher education through its stimulus package is minuscule when compared to the trillions it has handed out to Wall Street and its increased spending on the military and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The essential problem confronting the University of Illinois graduate employees is the same that confronts the entire working class: the subordination of social needs, including education, to the profit drive of the US financial elite and its predatory wars abroad.

The struggle of the University of Illinois graduate employees comes on the heels of the recent rejection by rank-and-file Ford workers of a concessions contract that corporate management and the United Auto Workers (UAW) attempted to force on them. It is another indication that sections of the working class are preparing to take a stand in defense of their most basic interests.



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