

University of Illinois graduate assistants authorize strike

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20 November 2012

Last week, graduate assistants at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) overwhelmingly voted to authorize a strike by nearly 2,400 teaching and graduate assistance on campus. Members of the Graduate Employees Organization (GEO), have been working without a contract since August 16.

Eighty-seven percent of GEO members participating in the poll voted to authorize a strike. The exploitation of poorly paid graduate assistants is an integral part of higher education at many universities. At UIUC, which is the flagship campus of the University of Illinois system, assistants teach more than 36 percent of freshman courses and more than 20 percent of courses overall.

In their new contract, grad assistants are asking for a minimum stipend equivalent to a living wage, wage increases for assistants earning more than the minimum stipend, better coverage of health care fees, and the protection of tuition waivers from reduction or elimination. Although negotiations began last April, discussions have recently reached an impasse over the university administration's continuing refusal to guarantee tuition waivers or improved wages.

In fact, the dispute over tuition waivers has been ongoing since the last round of contract negotiations, which began in early 2009. Seeking to ensure that waivers would at least remain at their present levels, graduate assistants at UIUC struck for the first time ever in November of that year (see "Illinois teaching and research assistants strike").

The GEO shut down the strike and abandoned the demands of teaching assistants under the pressure from its parent union, the Illinois Federation of Teachers. The IFT, which is affiliated nationally with the American Federation of Teachers, is closely aligned with the Democratic Party-controlled state government,

which oversees the University of Illinois and has spearheaded the attack on public employees, and public and higher education.

Earlier this year, the AFT-affiliated Chicago Teachers Union betrayed a strike by 28,000 public school teachers against Mayor Rahm Emanuel, paving the way for the shutdown of 100 schools and the implementation of President Obama's reactionary "school reform" agenda of using standardized tests to victimize teachers and privatize public schools.

Although the university agreed to contract language guaranteeing tuition waivers after 2009, the administration quickly reduced waivers for graduate assistants in several departments of the College of Fine and Applied Arts little more than six months after signing the contract.

GEO filed a grievance and appealed to a federal arbitrator, who eventually ruled in favor of the union, ordering administrators to reimburse students whose waivers had been affected, with the addition of 7 percent annual interest.

The university appealed the decision to the Illinois Educational Labor Relations Board, which just last Thursday endorsed the arbitrator's previous finding. It is widely expected the university administration will continue to drag out the case in the appeals courts and assistants whose waivers were affected may not receive compensation for years to come, if ever.

Many departments at UIUC already restrict tuition waivers to the "base" rate, leaving students with out-of-pocket expenses of tens of thousands of dollars. This particularly hits non-Illinois students who are charged substantially higher tuition rates. Many are compelled to take on significant student loan debt, in order to acquire degrees that offer only a tenuous chance of employment.

In the last round of contract negotiations, GEO also abandoned its “living wage” demand. The union ended up accepting a minimum stipend that fell short of their target by more than \$2,000 by the final year of the contract. Moreover, union negotiators settled for raises for only those earning the minimum stipend amount; all assistants earning even slightly more than the minimum did not receive a mandatory raise over the course of the three-year contract.

As it stands, GEO estimates that more than half of all graduate employees still earn less than what the university itself estimates is the cost of living in Urbana-Champaign. Many grad assistants struggling to juggle coursework with teaching and research obligations often must seek out second and third jobs in order to make ends meet, while those who attempt to raise families must do so on what amounts to poverty wages.

As per the current contract, the university waives 75 percent of grad assistants’ health care fee for the academic year. This waiver, however, covers neither summer health care nor insurance for dependents. If graduates wish to insure themselves over the summer, or their families throughout the year, they must pay the premium entirely out-of-pocket, and many simply do not make enough money to do so. Nor does the graduate employee health program provide prescription coverage.

In a deliberately provocative move, newly-hired Vice Chancellor and Provost Ilesanmi Adesida sent an email to students and faculty at UIUC last Thursday, a day after the strike authorization vote was completed, which sought to characterize graduate assistants’ demands as illegitimate. The letter stated that, “Contrary to a steady stream of communications from the GEO, degree-seeking graduate assistants do not need to fear that their assistantship tuition waiver support will be reduced or eliminated.”

Adesida went on to note that the university’s goal is to ensure “that departments can continue to oversee the financial packages offered to attract students”—in other words, reduce or eliminate waivers as they see fit. Promises to protect tuition waivers are belied by the university’s lead counsel, who admitted earlier this year that the administration is seeking to “generate revenue” from grad assistants.

The open letter further sought to counter grad assistants’ demands for better pay, stating that grad

assistants “on average” earn \$17,183 a year. For his part, Adesida earns \$430,000 a year—a 59 percent increase from his predecessor and nearly 30 times more than what a grad assistant earning the minimum stipend makes. When asked about this generous salary shortly after he was hired earlier this year, Adesida stated, “I’ve been here for a while, so it’s probably the market value.”

Throughout the United States and internationally, the cost of higher education at supposedly “public” universities has grown increasingly prohibitive for working and even many middle-class students. At UIUC, the base tuition rate alone has increased by more than \$2,500 for graduate students just since the 2008-2009 academic year, which amounts to an increase of nearly 30 percent for in-state students. Since 2000, tuition for in-state students has increased by an incredible 300 percent and for out-of-state students by more than 200 percent—in other words, at nearly ten times the rate of inflation for that period. The additional costs of room, board and various university fees have increased by a similar, if not greater, amount.

Teaching and graduate assistants cannot wage their battle alone. The broadest possible appeal should be made to the undergraduates and other sections of the university workforce—professors, secretaries, and maintenance and food workers—and the local community for a joint struggle to defend the right to higher education and decent living standards. This can only be carried out if the fight is waged independently of the Democratic Party politicians, the Illinois Federation of Teachers and the AFT.



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