

Illinois graduate assistants' union attempts to force through sellout contract

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On Tuesday, negotiators for the Graduate Employees Union (GEO) at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) signed a tentative agreement that contains major wage and health care concessions for graduate assistants. At a general membership meeting later that night, union representatives told graduates this was the best deal they were going to get, and that the university's proposals would only worsen if they did not accept it.

The tentative agreement for a five-year contract came on the last scheduled day of bargaining and is aimed at averting a strike, which grad assistants voted overwhelmingly to authorize two weeks ago. Universities are highly dependent on the low-wage labor of graduate employees; in addition to research and other academic duties, grad assistants at UIUC teach more than 36 percent of freshman courses and more than 20 percent of courses overall.

The agreement states that assistants currently earning the minimum stipend will receive a raise of only 2.5 percent for the first two years of the contract and only 1.5 percent for the remaining three years. Since these rates will fail to keep up with inflation, the agreement amounts to a pay cut over the five years of the contract.

Grad assistants demanded that the contract bring anyone earning the minimum stipend, presently \$14,820, up to a living wage. Now, according to tentative agreement, grads will earn less in the fifth year of the contract (2018) than the university's own miserly estimate for the cost of living in Champaign-Urbana for this year (\$16,900).

Moreover, the GEO bargaining team accepted the campus salary program for all those earning more than the minimum stipend at present, which leaves the wages of these employees to the complete discretion of the university, making them vulnerable to wage freezes

as well as cuts in pay.

The tentative agreement also contains major concessions on grad assistants' health care. Although the percentage of the student insurance premium that the university waives will increase, from 75 percent to 85 percent, the actual dollar amount that graduates pay toward already grossly inadequate health care coverage will actually increase over the course of the contract. GEO negotiators completely abandoned grad assistants' demands for health care coverage over the summer and for coverage of grad assistants' dependents. Graduate student insurance will continue to fail to provide prescription coverage.

Most importantly, GEO leaders accepted a proposal that leaves the future of tuition waivers, and thus affordable access to higher education, in doubt. Tuition waivers were the central issue in this contract, and the threat to revoke or diminish waivers fueled student opposition to the university's proposal, resulting in the powerful vote to authorize a strike.

The tentative agreement includes language stating that the university will not reduce tuition waivers during the five-year period covered by the contract, and that students whose waivers had been illegally reduced in 2010 will be reimbursed. University administrators had brazenly violated the previous contract when they reduced tuition waivers for incoming students in the College of Fine and Applied Arts.

However, since the language covering tuition waivers is in a side-letter, and not in the contract itself, waivers will once again be on the chopping block in the next round of negotiations, if not before. In fact, cuts to tuition waivers are perfectly acceptable to the GEO leaders, who at no point have claimed that waivers should be unconditionally defended, let alone extended to students who do not currently have them.

As the *Daily Illini* noted, in the second-to-last in seeking to portray this deal as an “historic bargaining session “the GEO laid out a proposal that explicitly explained how tuition waivers could be changed through bargaining, providing both sides with equal control over the waivers.”

Throughout the negotiations, GEO leaders have repeated that their objection is merely to “unilateral” changes to tuition waivers by university administrators. They seek only to be part of the bargaining process in the reduction of tuition waiver rates.

Moreover, GEO leaders have consistently framed the issue of tuition waivers not as a matter of defending the right to public education, but rather as a matter of keeping the University of Illinois “competitive” with other schools in attracting the best students. By suggesting what policies will best serve the university’s “bottom line,” GEO officials operate as business advisers to university administrators and the Board of Trustees.

At the GEO membership meeting Tuesday night, officers attempted to intimidate members into accepting the contract. Natalye Tate, co-president of the union, repeating the line of university negotiators, said, “This is the deal. This is all you’re going to get.” In seeking to force through a contract, which administrators desire, while refusing to mount a fight for better conditions in the university, the GEO is working not in the interests of graduate employees, but rather in the interests of administrators and the Board, who demand ever-cheaper labor costs.

The university is demanding these painful concessions from graduate workers under conditions in which the university’s operating budget has actually increased by 5 percent since 2011, and in which administrators make salaries in the \$400,000s and up. Regardless of the university’s finances, however, the demands of the ruling class and its political representatives for cuts to every conceivable social service grow louder.

In Illinois and throughout the country, the Obama administration and the Democratic Party have led the drive toward austerity. The state budget crisis in Illinois and the betrayal of the Chicago teachers’ strike earlier this year have together served to embolden the Democratic Party, which has subsequently ramped up its attacks on public education and education workers’ living standards.

“historic victory,” the GEO leaders parrot the lie Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) officials used last September to shut down the teachers’ strike and force through their sellout contract. The contract secured virtually every one of Mayor Rahm Emanuel’s demands, including codifying principals’ authority to hire and fire teachers and enforcing for the first time test-based teacher evaluation.

The reactionary agenda of the Democratic Party has been supported at every step by trade unions such as the Illinois Federation of Teachers and the American Federation of Teachers, both the parent organizations of the GEO and the CTU. In fact, the sellout of grad assistant living conditions by the GEO is completely in line with the policies of every other education union. These unions, whose top officials make salaries commensurate with university administrators, have time and again imposed the austerity demands of the Democratic Party and the wealthy elite whom they represent.

Graduate assistants must reject this rotten bargain! Grads must proceed not from what the university and GEO think is “acceptable,” which is five years of poverty wages and inadequate benefits, but rather from what is necessary. A serious struggle to defend public education and improve students’ and university workers’ living standards can only be successful insofar as it proceeds on the basis of a break with the Democratic Party and the union apparatus that supports it. An appeal must be made to every section of the university workforce, and to students at universities throughout the state, to join grad assistants in their fight to defend public education and improve students’ and workers’ living standards.



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