

University of Illinois graduate assistants:

Reject the sellout contract! Fight to defend the right to higher education and decent living standards!

Socialist Equality Party
4 December 2012

The Socialist Equality Party urges University of Illinois graduate assistants to reject the sellout agreement the Graduate Employees Organization has reached with UIUC administrators. Grad assistant students did not take a courageous stand—and vote overwhelmingly to authorize a strike—only to have the GEO capitulate to the administration’s demands.

If this deal is implemented, graduate assistants would be confined to five years of increasing poverty and inadequate health care. The future of tuition waivers, the issue most important for many grad assistants, would still be left in doubt. Moreover, the contract will be used by the university as a benchmark to impose sweeping givebacks on other university workers currently in negotiations.

* The grad assistants’ demand for a “living wage” has been completely abandoned. Assistants currently earning the minimum stipend will only receive a raise of 2.5 percent for the first two years of the contract and 1.5 percent for the remaining three.

With the cost of gas, food, education, health care and other necessities continuing to rise, this constitutes a real cut in wages over the next five years. By the end of the contract in 2017, grad students would be earning less than the university’s own miserly estimate of the cost of living in Champaign-Urbana for *this year* (\$16,900).

* The deal accepts the campus salary program for all those earning more than the minimum stipend at present. This will leave wage rates to the discretion of the university and vulnerable to years of wage freezes.

* GEO has also dropped the demand for summer

health coverage and coverage for dependents. This means continuing to have to choose between paying for health care for children or paying the rent, car insurance or the food bill.

* Most importantly, 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.

Throughout the negotiations, GEO leaders have made it clear that they do not have any principled opposition to undermining tuition waivers. They have only argued that the university should not carry out “unilateral” changes without the union’s participation.

All told, this contract maintains the semi-pariah status of grad assistants—who will continue to be little more than indentured servants providing cheap labor for the “right” to attend college and accumulate ever-greater levels of debt.

The claim that the university can only afford miserable wages and benefits is an outright lie. The university’s operating budget has increased by five percent since 2011, while top administrators make salaries in the \$400,000s and up.

Moreover, the university has repeatedly increased tuition rates, which have jumped by more than \$2,500 for graduate students since 2008-2009 alone. Since 2000, tuition for in-state students has increased by 300 percent and for out-of-state students by more than 200 percent—nearly ten times the rate of inflation. The additional costs of room, board and various university fees have increased by a similar, if not greater, amount.

Thus, the attack on grad assistants is part of an

overall attack on the very right to a higher education for working class and lower-middle class students. Increasingly, the universities are becoming the purview of only the most affluent layers of society. Over the last year, these conditions have provoked mass struggles by students in Quebec, Canada, Mexico, Chile and other countries.

The right to higher education, and for that matter, public education as a whole, is incompatible with the current levels of social inequality and an economic and political system that is solely beholden to the wealthiest 5 percent of society.

The entire political establishment—from Governor Pat Quinn, to President Obama, to the Republican House of Representatives—all claim there is “no money” for the most essential needs of the population. After bailing out the banks and funding war after war, both parties insist public schools must be closed, wages and pensions attacked, and bedrock social programs like Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security gutted. Meanwhile, the corporate and financial criminals responsible for the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression are doing better than ever.

Far from opposing this, the unions have been complicit in the attacks on the working class. Earlier this year, the Chicago Teachers Union shut down the strike by 28,000 teachers and signed an agreement—called an “austerity” deal by CTU President Karen Lewis—that accepted all of Mayor Rahm Emanuel’s demands. This has paved the way for the shutdown of 100 schools and the opening of another 60 for-profit charter schools.

Pseudo-left groups like the International Socialist Organization—which was complicit in the betrayal of the Chicago teachers—try to promote illusions in GEO and its parent unions—the Illinois Federation of Teachers and the American Federation of Teachers. In reality, their support for the capitalist system and alliance with the Democratic Party has transformed the unions into enforcers of austerity, wage cutting and the destruction of basic social rights.

The rejection of this sellout can become the catalyst for a much wider struggle to defend the right to higher education and decent living standards for all. Grad assistants should make the broadest possible appeal to undergraduates, 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 graduate employees. Democratic Party politicians and the parent unions, the Illinois Federation of Teachers (IFT) and the AFT, are not.

This successful fight demands the development of a political struggle against the Democrats and Republicans and the capitalist profit system they defend. The resources exist to guarantee high quality and free education—from pre-school through graduate school—for everyone. But this requires breaking the dictatorial hold of the financial elite and a radical redistribution of wealth to meet human need, not private profit.

The Socialist Equality Party and its student organization, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality IYSSE, are the only organizations seeking to build an independent movement of the working class with the aim of taking political power.

We call on all those looking to secure decent jobs, free public education and genuine social equality to contact our organization, study our literature and build the leadership for the fight for a socialist alternative.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact