

Illinois grad assistants union pushes through concessions contract

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13 December 2012

Graduate students at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign have voted to approve a contract supported by the Graduate Employees Organization (GEO). The contract contains significant concessions, which are part of an overall attack on public education throughout the state and nationally.

The GEO said that the vote was 95 percent in favor, though the union has refused to release the percentage of assistants who participated in the vote. Participation was discouraged by the GEO, which circulated the tentative agreement and announced the ratification vote with notice of less than 24 hours, preventing any serious discussion of the contract. Those students who did vote for the contract did so after the union insisted that nothing better could be achieved.

The GEO, which is affiliated with the Illinois Federation of Teachers-American Federation of Teachers, part of the AFL-CIO, was determined not to lead a strike of graduate students, despite an overwhelming strike authorization vote. The GEO insisted that the agreement was the best assistants could expect—far better than to “lose everything” by striking.

The new contract contains major concessions on all of the grad assistants’ principal demands: tuition waivers, wages and health care.

In the new contract, assistants currently earning the minimum stipend—only \$14,820 a year—will receive a raise of only 2.5 percent for the first two years and only 1.5 percent for the remaining three. Since these rates will fail to keep up with inflation, assistants are facing a five-year cut in real wages. Graduate students will be earning less in the fifth year of the contract in 2017 than the \$16,900 the university currently estimates is the cost of

living in the area.

Moreover, since the contract confines the wages of those earning more than the minimum stipend to the Campus Wage Program, the pay of these assistants will be left vulnerable to years of wage freezes, as in fact occurred during the last contract.

Although the percentage of the student insurance premium that the university pays will increase, from 75 percent to 80 percent, the actual dollar amount that graduates pay toward already grossly inadequate healthcare coverage will actually increase over the course of the contract.

The GEO leadership completely abandoned assistants’ demands for a healthcare waiver over the summer and for grad assistants’ dependents. Graduate student insurance will still fail to cover prescriptions.

Most importantly, GEO leaders accepted a proposal that leaves the future of tuition waivers, and thus affordable access to higher education, in doubt. 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.

At a meeting before the ratification vote, GEO spokesperson Stephanie Seawell responded to a question from an assistant asking why the union did not oppose the lengthy five-year term of the contract: “We’ve been having an earthquake under our feet. This contract is just the start of the fight. Healthcare for dependents isn’t something we’re going to win overnight. This contract will give us five years of peace, five years in which to organize.”

This claim, which seeks to portray a defeat as a victory, echoes a similar one made by leaders of the Chicago Teachers Union during their betrayal of the Chicago teachers strike, that the end of the strike was just the beginning of the struggle against school closures and attacks on public education. In fact, it was just the opposite—a signal for Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel to press ahead with a plan to close at least one hundred schools and ramp up the opening of charter schools, knowing that teachers would not be in a position to put up an organized opposition.

The unions are incapable of waging a struggle in defense of education and education workers because of their political alliance with the Democratic Party, which is spearheading the attacks on behalf of the financial aristocracy. The AFT and its president, Randi Weingarten, are enthusiastic backers of the Obama administration and have collaborated in its assault on public education.

Grad assistants and other university workers must draw the lessons of this betrayal: in the conflict between the administration's demands for lower labor costs and students' and workers' demands for better living conditions, the union officials side with and enforce the interests of the ruling class.

In order for the fight to defend and improve public education and workers' living standards to be successful, it is necessary to break with these organizations and form independent organizations of struggle: rank-and-file committees which take as their starting point the rejection of the subordination of workers to the Democratic Party and to capitalism. A new, revolutionary leadership must be built among the working class. The WSWS urges all students and workers who support this perspective to contact us and build the SEP and IYSSE.



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