

University of Illinois graduate student workers go on strike

Alexander Fangmann
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Graduate student workers at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), the flagship campus of the state's public university system, walked out on Monday, causing some classes to be moved or cancelled. The 2,700 workers, who teach students, grade papers, and perform other functions essential to the operation of the university, are frustrated by the university administration's intransigence over pay increases and tuition waivers, which grad students depend on to fund the exorbitant cost of education.

The strike is a healthy and welcome response to decades of attacks on public higher education, and takes place amid a resurgence of militancy among educators in the United States and around the world. More than 20,000 West Virginia teachers and school employees are currently on strike, along with 40,000 university lecturers in the United Kingdom. This follows a province-wide strike by 12,000 Ontario community college faculty members late last year.

The Graduate Employees Organization (GEO) at UIUC, whose members include graduate assistants and teaching assistants, called the strike after a bargaining session on Sunday produced no "movement," according to GEO co-president Gus Wood. The union has been negotiating with the university for 11 months. The grad student's last, five-year contract expired on August 15.

The GEO, which is affiliated to the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), has proposed a wage increase that would increase the minimum pay rate by eight percent from the current insultingly low level of \$16,281 for a 50 percent Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) position or 20 hours per week. The GEO's proposal would also see all other workers get a 3.75 percent increase in the first year and four percent in the second year of a two-year contract.

The GEO's management-friendly proposal—which would be eaten away entirely by inflation, along with health care and other fee increases—has been countered by a proposal that can only be considered a declaration of warfare by the university administration. Officials are offering a five-year contract, with a 4 percent increase in the minimum pay rate in the first year, and a pathetic 1.5 percent each of the last four years, with reappointed (returning) workers receiving a 3 percent increase in the first year.

Even more concerning to graduate workers has been the university's refusal to keep existing contract language that could hold the university to the current rate of tuition waivers that students receive. Tuition waivers are often what makes graduate study possible for many students. The university's proposed language for a "side letter" concerning waivers makes clear that administrators want to institute several tiers of waivers. In this way, they plan to extract money from certain classes of students, such as out-of-state and international students, although such a program could certainly be expanded to target certain majors.

That this is the case can be seen in official statements, with Provost Andreas Cangellaris saying, "The university wants to continue having the flexibility to consider new professional degrees that respond to needs or trends in the world in terms of specialized education at the post grad level." Why this would require compensating these students less is, of course, left unexplained.

Graduate workers have good reason to be concerned. Sections of the financial aristocracy, including billionaire Illinois Governor Bruce Rauner, have indicated they would like to carry out a massive consolidation and downsizing of public higher education. The biggest targets are the smaller regional

public universities, which would see “duplicate” programs closed and housed on single campuses, limiting access, in a manner similar to what has occurred in the City Colleges of Chicago under Rahm Emanuel, where each campus has had to specialize in particular programs.

Rauner also oversaw a massive drop in enrollment at public universities and colleges as a result of the budget impasse he pushed, which starved public universities and colleges of funding in order to force them to spend down their reserves and institute budget cuts and layoffs.

Even before Rauner, public higher education has been a target for massive spending cuts by both political parties over the past several decades. When the Democratic Party controlled the state legislature, public higher education funding in Illinois dropped from \$2.2 billion in 2008 to \$1.9 billion in 2015, according to the Center for Tax and Budget Accountability (CTBA). The CTBA report also noted that since 2000, adjusted for inflation, higher education has been singled out for deeper cuts than any major area of state spending, with an effective reduction of 41 percent.

For this reason, graduate workers at the University of Illinois must shake off illusions in the AFT and the unions, which seek above all to tie teachers to the Democratic Party. Back in December, the Illinois Federation of Teachers (IFT) endorsed billionaire investor J.B. Pritzker for governor. Pritzker’s sister Penny Pritzker served as President Barack Obama’s Commerce Secretary, and both Pritzkers enjoy longstanding ties to the Democratic Party establishment, which has overseen the assault on public education in Illinois.

Already, elements of the Democratic Party are hovering around the strike and attempting to promote reformist illusions. Prominent among these is state senator Daniel Biss, a gubernatorial candidate who has cast himself as a supposed “progressive” against Pritzker as well as Christopher Kennedy. Biss previously spent time attacking state workers, including educators, through his co-sponsorship of SB 1, the pension cut bill, which was ultimately struck down by the state supreme court.

The AFT, which along with the National Education Association is seeking to sabotage West Virginia teachers, has long collaborated with the Democratic

Party in sweeping attacks on education.

Graduate workers at the UIUC, in order to carry on a successful fight against the university administration, must begin to organize their struggle outside of the confines of the AFT, and build rank-and-file committees to handle the day-to-day organization of the strike and plan outreach to build mass meetings and demonstrations and rally the widest possible support for the strike among educators as well as other sections of the working class.



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