

# University of Illinois strike exposes plight of graduate students, adjuncts

Alexander Fangmann  
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As the strike of graduate student workers at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) enters a fifth day, it has highlighted many of the issues affecting higher education workers and students throughout the United States. Above all, the growth of inequality and the financial aristocracy's demand for drastic reductions in spending on education have resulted in stagnant or even poverty wages for huge numbers of workers and educational opportunities increasingly shaped by corporate demands.

In particular, the strike has brought attention to the vast expansion of poorly paid part-time and graduate student labor in colleges and universities in order to cut costs. As a result of this shift, full-time professors now comprise only a minority of total instructors, according to the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). Numbers from the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicate that in 2015 there were 121,120 graduate teaching assistants employed in higher education.

UIUC is among the top ten schools in the country with the highest rates of employment of teaching assistants as the primary instructor, with 19 percent of classes taught directly by a teaching assistant, as noted by *US News and World Report*. The leaders, Purdue University—West Lafayette and the University of South Florida, are at 26 percent and 25 percent, respectively.

The lack of full-time professor positions means that a large number of these graduate student workers earning graduate degrees will end up finding no opportunities outside of so-called “adjunct” positions. These part-time jobs, typically offering no health insurance or other benefits, usually pay by the course, at a median rate of \$2,700 per course. Moreover, many people holding these positions are forced to hold down positions at multiple schools to find enough classes to teach to make ends meet. Various recent reports,

including in the *Guardian*, report on workers holding these jobs who are homeless, or have had to resort to prostitution.

The inadequacy of the \$16,281 minimum pay rate for graduate employees at UIUC is made clear by the fact that it is actually \$6,000 less than the university's published annual cost of living for the Champaign-Urbana area. The low pay rate makes it effectively impossible for a graduate student worker to support a family or to live above poverty levels without taking out large student loans, which further limit their options upon graduation.

Even as pay for huge swathes of academic workers have been slashed, the income and wealth of university administrators has soared. University of Illinois President Timothy Killeen receives a base salary of \$600,000 per year and has received \$100,000 bonuses each of the past two years. The chancellor of the UIUC campus, Robert Jones, makes \$649,000, and was selected after a search that reportedly cost \$140,000. The vice president of academic affairs, Barbara Jan Wilson, makes \$330,000, and the chief financial officer, Walter Knorr, makes \$341,623. In fact, the top 25 administrators make over \$8,000,000 in total.

These highly-paid administrators are accustomed to hobnobbing with business executives and other members of the financial elite and share all of their general outlook.

The issue of tuition waivers has been a rallying point for striking graduate workers because the move by the university to cut the level of tuition waivers undermines access to graduate education. With Illinois resident base tuition for graduate students at \$12,060 and out-of-state tuition starting at \$26,058, many students have indicated that with cuts, they would be unable to continue their education. They also worry that if these

are cut for future students, graduate education as a whole will be gutted, and students are right to take up this issue as a general defense of public education.

Student Vanessa Rivera Quiñones asked on Twitter, “What lesson are we teaching if our university doesn’t provide access? #TuitionWaivers are a way to improve access. #HigherEd should not be only for the wealthy.”

Another, Amanda Wolf, a former teaching assistant wrote on Facebook, “Without the tuition waiver I received last year to be a teaching assistant here in the Department of Urban Planning, I may not have been able to afford to come to the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.”

On Facebook Jennifer Leigh-Sears Scheier said, “Without a guaranteed Tuition Waiver, I CANNOT afford to continue in my program, which means my current pursuit on the History of Stage Management will come to a SWIFT END.”

In fact, there should be a vast expansion in the support for public university education, including graduate education. The *Chicago Tribune* reported that 6,980 graduate students receive full or partial waivers, while 4,595 receive none. These latter students, unless they are extremely wealthy, are often forced to take out enormous student loans.

All indications are that the strike is receiving widespread support among undergraduate students and faculty at UIUC.

Tooma Zaghoul noted on Twitter, “This is my third day of being on a strike. I’ve been receiving support e-mails from my students since last Thursday.”

The *Tribune* reported that 100 classes were canceled on Monday, while the Graduate Employees Organization (GEO) itself said that their action resulted in the effective shutdown of large parts of campus, as other instructors moved their own classes away from those building being picketed by graduate student workers or cancelled them altogether. On Wednesday, the union co-president, Gus Wood, said that eight campus buildings had been shut down.

Nonetheless, graduate student workers must be wary about the efforts of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and Illinois Federation of Teachers (IFT), who are working behind the scenes with university administration and the Democratic Party to negotiate a sellout, in a similar fashion to what has played out in West Virginia. There is an indication of

this in Provost Andreas Cangellaris’ comment to the *News-Gazette*, “I do not anticipate this going very long. I am an optimist here.”

In particular, graduate student workers should study closely the ongoing strike of the teachers in West Virginia. There, teachers have rejected the attempts of the AFT and NEA to force them into accepting a sellout agreement, and organized county-by-county votes to continue the strike, in defiance of the unions. As the strike at UIUC goes on there will only be more pressure on the unions to reign it in, meaning that graduate student workers must begin now to organize rank-and-file committees to wage a struggle independently of the AFT and IFT and appeal to graduate students, university workers and teachers across the US and internationally for support.



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