

Union betrays graduate workers' strike at University of Illinois

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Last Friday, March 9, marked the end of the 12-day strike by 2,700 graduate students and teaching assistants at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC). With a low turnout for the ratification vote, the Graduate Employees Organization/Illinois Federation of Teachers Local 6300 (GEO) pushed through a sellout agreement, which betrayed the principled struggle by graduate student workers.

The extremely low-paid workers will get a 4.5 percent raise in the first year of the contract, followed by 2 percent increases in the second and third years. The previous minimum annual salary of a graduate student worker was \$16,281, some \$6,000 below what is called the minimum living wage in the area. This will only rise to \$17,097 in the first year. Healthcare benefits for individual grad students will cover 87 percent of medical costs, up from 80 percent, but only 25 percent of the costs for dependents. In other words, workers will still make poverty wages while they pay large out-of-pocket costs for their partners and children.

Of even greater significance, GEO and the state affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers abandoned the strikers' main demand: guaranteed tuition waivers, which defray a significant portion of the university's ever-rising tuition fees. Workers struck to guarantee the right to these waivers not just for themselves, but for future students as well.

The new contract states, "Future students would be governed by the new policy in place at the time of their enrollment." Speaking on the five-year "guarantee," GEO negotiator Bruce Kovanen said, "Most important from the union's perspective, anyone with a 25 percent to 67 percent time appointment as a teaching assistant or graduate assistant will be guaranteed a waiver, he said. The type of waiver—full or base rate (similar to in-

state tuition)—will depend on which program they're enrolled in."

In other words, the union capitulated to the administration's demand for a multi-tier tuition waiver system. While nominally guaranteeing waivers for current members, GEO gave the university the power to change the type of program a student is enrolled in at will, thereby reducing the amount of the waiver or eliminating it altogether.

The GEO has been silent on this since it exposes its claims of "victory."

After the *World Socialist Web Site* exposed this in a March 9 article, said representatives from GEO posted a comment below the article accusing the WSWS of "lying" about the union abandoning guaranteed waivers. In the next breath, however, the commentator said GEO is "going to spend much of the next few years protecting guaranteed tuition waivers through grievances."

Having already demobilized the striking students after doing nothing to broaden the struggle against the bipartisan attack on public education and state employees in Illinois, GEO would have workers believe their rights will be ensured through impotent appeals to university officials and labor relations boards!

The commentator continues: "Frankly, you can have whatever argument you want to with the Democrats, the Democratic Party and mainstream unions, but you should understand that the GEO is ENTIRELY member run. It is one of the most democratic unions in the U.S."

Such a claim is belied by the fact that GEO's parent union is the American Federation of Teachers, which has decades of experience in running roughshod over the will of teachers in order to do the bidding of big-business politicians and the worst enemies of public

education, including the Eli Broad and Bill and Melinda Gates foundations.

GEO invited AFT President Randi Weingarten to speak at a rally on campus on March 9. Weingarten, who makes close to \$500,000 per year, came to UIUC fresh from her betrayal of the strike by 33,000 West Virginia teachers and school employees, which had erupted as a rank-and-file rebellion against the state affiliates of the AFT and the National Education Association (NEA). Fearing the spread of teacher struggles throughout the US, Weingarten and her cronies in the WVEA and the AFT-WV struck a deal with billionaire governor Jim Justice to end the strike.

The deal abandoned the strikers' main demand to fully fund the state's public employees medical insurance agency and end soaring out-of-pocket costs. To add insult to injury, the one-time 5 percent pay raise—for teachers who will remain near the bottom in the country in salary—will be paid for through cuts in other essential services.

There may be graduate students in the leadership of the GEO and some members, no doubt, who hoped joining an AFT-affiliated union might strengthen them and put them in contact with teachers throughout the state also fighting the attacks of Governor Bruce Rauner and the state legislature. But this does not change the fact that GEO is controlled by the AFT, not its members.

GEO also follows the same political line as the AFT promoting Chicago Alderman Carlos Ramirez-Rosa and the corporate-controlled Democratic Party, which is no less an enemy of public education than Rauner and the Republicans. In 2012, the AFT-affiliated Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) betrayed the strike by over 20,000 teachers before it erupted into a direct political confrontation with Mayor Rahm Emanuel and the Obama administration's reactionary "school reform" agenda. This paved the way for Emanuel to close 49 schools in the city and expand the number of for-profit charter schools.

In July 2017, Illinois State Democrats voted with Republicans on an austerity budget that stripped funding for public education from the K-12 to the university level, after the budget crisis of nearly two years that left schools starved for necessary funds and in peril of shutting down.

The fight to defend good-paying jobs, healthcare, and

higher education for all is a political fight. It cannot be conducted within the framework of pro-capitalist unions tied to the big-business Democratic Party. Teachers in West Virginia and now lecturers in the United Kingdom were forced to rebel against the unions, and the same must be done by graduate students and teaching assistants.

Student workers must continue their principled fight—but they must organize independently of the unions by forming rank-and-file committees elected by and democratically controlled by graduate students and teaching assistants themselves.

The resources to fund higher education exist in abundance. If society's resources are to be used for the common good, instead of enriching the few and waging war, then the working class must build a powerful movement for socialism. We urge grad students and teaching assistants to join the International Youth and Students for Social Equality to take up this fight.



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