

University of Illinois at Chicago graduate student workers go on strike

Andy Thompson
21 March 2019

Graduate student workers at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) went on strike Tuesday to fight against low wages, unfair appointment policies and to demand full healthcare coverage and protect tuition waivers, among other issues. The strike so far has caused many classes at UIC to be canceled.

About 1,500 students work as graduate and teaching assistants for professors in undergraduate courses, some responsible for class sizes of more than 60 students. Graduate students grade papers, run discussion sections and labs, tutor one-on-one, and perform research and other essential duties while also studying in PhD and Master's programs.

The minimum salary for graduate workers is just \$18,065 and requires 20 hours per week of work for the nine-month school year. Most students are also responsible for an average of \$2,000 in university fees each year. Many graduate students have to work more than one additional job to make ends meet. The minimum annual income needed to live in Chicago is estimated at \$28,000.

The strike comes after more than a year of bargaining between the UIC administration and the graduate workers' union, the Graduate Employee's Organization (GEO)—affiliated to the Illinois Federation of Teachers (IFT) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) nationally—failed to produce any agreement. The GEO has proposed a contract which would waive all fees for graduate workers, increase the percentage the university pays for healthcare coverage, reform the system for earning appointments, and provide a wage increase to \$24,000 by 2021. The UIC administration has so far rejected these proposals.

The next bargaining session is set to take place Thursday.

In a show of support, hundreds of students, educators

and graduate student workers from across Chicago have joined the picket lines. Graduate student workers staged a rally yesterday with hundreds in attendance.

Alize, who is working on her PhD in anthropology, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the struggles facing graduate student workers.

“Since I have started working here as a grad student, which is five years ago, there has been an exorbitant amount of increase in fees. As an international student, I pay more than \$2,000 dollars each year, which is a big burden, especially considering we make \$15,000 dollars a year and have to pay these fees in August, before we start getting paid. The university acts on the assumption that international students are inherently rich, which is just not true and offensive.

“There have been so many times that I had to take time off my studies and teaching to go to focus groups to make some extra money—whereas I should be able to focus on my research and giving a good education to undergraduate students.” She continued, “Recently, UIC's budget has increased, and millions of dollars have been invested to new buildings rising on Harrison, as well as bonuses for the high-up administrators. Graduate students are barely making ends meet and are already extremely overworked. I have had 75 students per semester!”

When asked what she would like to see in a new contract, she said, “I'd like to see these fees waived and living wages. Also, the university doesn't enforce a procedure for TA/GA appointments such as when they should be finalized, who can get them, how they can be chosen, etc.” This essentially means that there is no guarantee that grad workers will have a job from one semester to the next.

Alize spoke on the university's response to the strike, “They have been using desperate intimidating tactics,

telling undergrads we want their tuitions raised or that we make \$62,000 a year.”

The university arrived at this higher number by counting tuition waivers as income.

When asked about her experience on the picket line, Alize said, “It was amazing. It was wonderful to see the university community show up and show so much support. We had truck drivers passing by and other riders on Halsted have shown us so much love and support! That was very powerful. I’m angry at the administration but also very energized and ready to go back!”

Another student told the WSWS the official numbers do not tell the real story of their conditions: “While the numbers that get bandied around is that TA/GA get paid \$18,000 total for nine months work, in truth there are scenarios like mine, where I get paid for 8 months because of the winter break. So, in truth I make around \$16,000 a year. UIC then takes back \$2,000 in fees every year, and I pay about \$1,500 in taxes. So in truth, I am surviving in Chicago on about \$12,000.”

He continued, “I have savings and my wife works, so I am surviving, but I can’t really imagine other people doing so on these wages.”

The UIC graduate student strike is part of a wave of educator walkouts from West Virginia to Oklahoma, Los Angeles, Oakland and around the world. The strike at UIC is not just an issue of one university administration, but a fight back against a nationwide attack on public education, backed by both big business parties, Democrats and Republicans.

UIC graduate workers should pay close attention to these struggles. They are rightly inspired by the militancy of hundreds of thousands of teachers who have walked off the job to fight for better conditions and to defend public education, and seek to unite with them. But they should also be aware of the role the unions have played in selling out these struggles and blocking a united struggle by educators.

In the case of last year’s strike at UIC’s sister school, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), the GEO sold out the students’ central demands for guaranteed tuition waivers and full healthcare coverage. In a Facebook post Monday night, UIC GEO praised the UIUC agreement saying, “They set the example for us.”

This is a warning. Graduate student workers cannot

place their faith in the GEO, an organization whose past agreements have produced the conditions facing UIC student graduate workers today. It is through unions like the IFT and AFT, the GEO’s state and national parent organizations, that the Democratic Party is able to enforce its pro-austerity education agenda.

The many experiences in recent years of betrayals of other educators in Chicago, West Virginia, Champaign-Urbana, Los Angeles and Oakland have confirmed this.

Grad student workers confront the same obstacles as educators in other areas and they face the same obstacle in the unions. Graduate workers should turn to the broadest sections of the working class and form a democratically elected rank and file organization in order to carry out the fight to defend public education on their own terms, not those dictated by the AFT, the Democratic Party and ultimately the university administration. The Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality are prepared to assist and we urge graduate student workers to contact us today.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact