

Strike by University of Illinois at Chicago grad students in danger

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28 March 2019

The strike by over 1,500 University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) graduate assistants and teaching assistants entered its eighth day today. Grad students who make poverty wages walked out of classes March 19 to demand increased pay, better appointment policies, increased healthcare coverage and a decrease in administration fees. The strike has forced UIC to cancel many of its classes. UIC is currently on spring break, which has halted regular picketing by striking students until next Monday, when classes are set to resume.

Last month, 99.5 percent of the 1,014 participating GEO members voted to authorize the strike, expressing the growing militancy of educators and workers across the United States and internationally. Last year, nearly 400,000 teachers were involved in strikes, including statewide walkouts in West Virginia, and so far, this year more than 7,100 educators have struck in Los Angeles, Denver and Oakland, California.

The current minimum salary for graduate workers, working 20 hours per week for the nine-month school year is just \$18,065. In the last contract, GEO agreed to a \$2,000 raise over three years, which has done little to help grad students survive in one of the most expensive cities in the US.

“My course load is tough and it’s a lot of work,” a UIC teaching assistant told the WSW. “I spend at least 12 hours grading papers on the weekend along with the two classes that I teach. I try to give generous feedback on a lot of these papers and assignments to help the students, to let them see what they can improve on. Not everybody can do that. Some of the grad students have families to support. One of my friends with a family took a job with Instacart on top of graduate education and teaching and everything she has to do.

“I don’t know how someone with that schedule has time to give as much feedback on student papers. So, the education suffers whenever you don’t pay a living wage

to graduate students and teaching assistants. It’s really an investment. But the university administration does not see it that way. Investing in teachers pays back, because we are what brings value to the university.”

At the same time, UIC has billions in assets and handsomely pays its top administrators. UIC’s chancellor, Michael Dimitrios Amiridis, receives an annual salary of \$475,000 and has received yearly bonuses over \$100,000. Furthermore, UIC just recently announced a \$1 billion campaign to renovate its campus in Chicago. There is more than enough money to fully meet the needs of students.

The struggle has thrust the grad students into direct conflict with the austerity measures of the Illinois state government, which is dominated by the Democratic Party. The state’s billionaire governor, Democrat J.B. Pritzker, heads up the University of Illinois Board of Trustees and has appointed several members of the management board, which is largely made up by investment bankers and other corporate figures.

While the grad students have received broad support from workers and students across Chicago who have joined picket lines and posted supportive messages on social media, their struggle has been isolated by the teachers unions, which are aligned with Pritzker and the state Democrats. The strikers are members of the UIC Graduate Employees Organization (GEO) Local 6297, which is affiliated with the Illinois Federation of Teachers and its parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).

UIC GEO’s co-presidents Anne Kirkner and Jeff Schuhrke penned an open letter on Sunday to Governor Pritzker, proclaiming the billionaire a “champion for workers’ rights,” while asking him to intervene in UIC GEO bargaining and settle the negotiations in favor of the striking students. This billionaire, workers’ rights “champion” is part of the Pritzker family, one of the

wealthiest on the planet, and an heir to his family's Hyatt hotel business that has long attacked its hotel workers, paying some as little as \$9 an hour. In fact, the governor has already "intervened" as the budget-cutter-in-chief.

This poses the necessity for grad students to organize a rank-and-file strike committee, independent of the union, to fight for the expansion of the strike to the faculty and employees of all University of Illinois campuses and then to universities and colleges around the state to eradicate poverty wages for grad students. These strike committees must appeal for support from the 20,000 Chicago Public Schools educators who will be facing concession demands when their contracts expire at the end of the school year. In this struggle, rank-and-file educators must outline demands that they and their students need, not what the corporate-controlled political establishment and the unions say is affordable.

The strike at UIC follows last year's strike by 2,700 graduate workers at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), the flagship campus of the state's public university system. The 12-day strike was called and eventually betrayed by the UIUC GEO local 6300, leading to a sellout contract which included paltry wage increases and abandoned the central demand for guaranteed tuition waivers. This betrayal was recently hailed by the UIC GEO leadership on their Facebook page as an "example" of a successful strike.

Negotiations between UIC and GEO began in March 2018, two months before UIC faculty, part of the UIC United Faculty union and also affiliated with the IFT and AFT, began new contract negotiations with UIC. The unions have deliberately separated these struggles, while appealing to the state Democrats to intervene.

In December 2018, the GEO and the university's bargaining team agreed to federal mediation which began on February 1, 2019. As of this writing, the GEO has held 25 bargaining negotiations with UIC. The 26th session is set to take place today.

GEO initially asked for a 10 percent increase on the current minimum wage for graduate workers each year for the next three years, the duration of the contract, rising to \$24,000 by 2021. They have asked for a reduction in fees to counter the average \$2,000 in fees per academic year graduate student workers have to pay.

Even GEO has characterized its demands as wholly inadequate. Writing on Facebook on March 25, the union posted, "Even if we got a 24% raise over 3 years, we would still be making \$5,000-\$9,000 less in the year 2021 than grad workers at other Research 1 universities in

Chicago are already making in 2019." It added, "The teachers with Chicago International Charter Schools (CICS) who were on strike in February won 35% raises, so 24% is rather conservative by comparison."

However, the GEO has pulled back from these meager demands. Writing again on Facebook on March 22, local officers said, "In our bargaining session this past Monday, GEO had proposed a few different possible ways to waive, cap, or freeze fees, letting the administration know we are prepared to step down on our current wages proposal in exchange for them making some movement on fees."

On March 26, after their latest bargaining session, GEO officials confirmed that a concession had been put forth, stating UIC had asked "us to step down on our wage proposal more than we already have."

Meanwhile, the top officials in the American Federation of Teachers inhabit a different universe. AFT President Randi Weingarten makes \$514,144 a year; Executive Vice President Mary Cathryn Ricker, \$332,463; and Secretary Treasurer Lorretta Johnson, \$395,291. IFT president Dan Montgomery makes approximately \$280,000 a year.

UIC GEO members pay hundreds of thousands each year in dues to its affiliated unions, much of which is funneled to the same Democrats spearheading the attack on public and higher education. According to open990.com, the UIC GEO paid \$345,875 in 2017, \$337,598 in 2016, and \$296,267 in 2015. If payments in 2018 are within the range of the previous years, the GEO members paid over \$1 million to its affiliates.

Although grad students are forced to fork over this money, the unions have not provided student workers with any strike benefits, forcing them to rely on supporters to provide donations to a GoFundMe strike fund account.

Striking workers must reject the sellout that is being prepared. Instead rank-and-file strike committees should fight for a counter-offensive of the working class throughout Chicago and the state against both corporate-controlled parties and their program of austerity and social inequality.



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