University of Chicago graduate student union authorizes strike action

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Last week, University of Chicago (U of C) graduate students voted to authorize strike action by an overwhelming majority. Graduate Students United (GSU), a graduate student union affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) with over 1,500 members, announced 91 percent of the 1,134 members voted to authorize a strike. As of this writing, no strike date has been set.

The vote is in response to the U of C administration's anti-democratic attempts to refuse to recognize the GSU as a legal bargaining unit for almost two years. The GSU can begin contract negotiations only after the administration recognizes it.

U of C's right-wing administration invited the fascist and former advisor to President Donald Trump, Stephen Bannon, to speak on-campus in 2018 but the event was called off after mass protests by students. One of the most prestigious private universities in the US, U of C has fostered some of the most notorious right-wing economists in history, including Milton Friedman, whose ruthless free market doctrine was adopted by Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet after the CIA-backed coup in 1973.

In 2016, the National Labor Relations Board ruled graduate student workers at Columbia University are employees and could form a union, paving the way for unionization at other private schools.

Loyola University Chicago graduate workers voted to unionize and affiliate with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) in February 2017. U of C grad workers voted to unionize in September 2017, followed by grad workers at Northwestern University, located just north of Chicago, who voted to unionize and affiliate with the AFT.

All three school administrations appealed to the NLRB, suggesting that grad workers are not employees but just students and therefore not entitled to unionize. U of C's legal counsel made the absurd claims that grad students "are not working. They are teaching."

In one testimony, a member of U of C's legal counsel, Zachary Fasman, stated, "We do not treat them as employees. They don't have hours. They can and do their … they can do their research when they choose. Their financial package which they receive is in no way dependent on how many hours they work or whether their experiments fail or succeed. In fact, as the record will reflect, if we're allowed to present testimony, as students learn, most of their experiments fail. And what employer would employ people whose experiments constantly fail?"

With the inauguration of Trump, the newly appointed NLRB members have signaled their opposition to the unionization of grad students. While their Obama-appointed predecessors generally followed the tactics of the Democratic Party, which relies on the unions to contain and suppress the class struggle, the Republicans have primarily sought to undermine the institutional and political interests of the unions.

Out of fear the new appointed board members would reverse the Columbia decision, graduate student unions at the University of Chicago, Loyola, Northwestern and others across the country withdrew their requests for union recognition from the NLRB, instead asking schools for voluntary recognition. Instead, the U of C's administration has stonewalled and refused to voluntarily recognize the GSU.

An undergraduate student, Tyler, told the WSWS, "The fact that GSU voted for unionization almost two years ago and that the U of C admin continues to ignore that point and the demands of grad students is ludicrous and speaks to how un-democratic, non-transparent, and secretive the admin is and functions and that needs to change now. Grad students teach and teaching is labor, not even including everything else that grad students do for this school in producing knowledge and it's their right as workers to be able to unionize and bargain for better benefits, wages, etc."

Grad students have found widespread support from undergraduate students and faculty, with many wearing pins and t-shirts displaying words of support.

Students have seen rising costs to tuition. According to collegetuitioncompare.com, the average cost of yearly

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undergraduate tuition at the University of Chicago in the 2000-2001 school year was $25,239. By 2018-2019, it had more than doubled to $58,230. Similarly, graduate student tuition was $58,968 in 2018-2019, up from $26,454 in 2000-2001.

The university has a total endowment of $8.2 billion. U of C President Robert Zimmer's total compensation for 2016, including base pay, deferred compensation and housing benefits, was $1,625,136, according to *Business Insider*. During his tenure, Zimmer has implemented funding cuts to non-academic programs and academic departments while initiating renovation projects costing billions.

Meanwhile, according to glassdoor.com, the average stipend for a U of C grad student is $31,432 a year.

While the strike authorization vote by grad students reflects the growing radicalization of educators and students, the fact is the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and other unions offer them no way forward.

Over the last year-and-a-half, leading executives from the AFT and the National Education Association (NEA) have been crisscrossing the country in an effort to stop the spread of teacher strikes against the bipartisan assault on public education and teachers. If strikes erupted invariably through the initiative of rank-and-file educators, the AFT, NEA and their state and local affiliates isolated the struggles and then signed deals that betrayed the aspirations of teachers. Politically subservient to the corporate-controlled Democrats and led by executives whose incomes put them in the top 5 percent of the population, the unions will do nothing that challenges the current unequal distribution of wealth.

Last month, the AFT affiliate Rutgers University's faculty union reached a deal with Rutgers administrators, calling off a strike by over 3,000 professors and teaching assistants. The contract agreement does nothing to address the basic demands of better pay with raises to be made null by inflation.

The Graduate Employees Organization at the University of Illinois at Chicago, also an AFT affiliate, betrayed the strike by 1,500 UIC graduate students last month. The GEO ratified a contract that leaves grad students earning poverty-level wages. As at U of C, the UIC graduate student strike was strongly supported by students and teachers at UIC and across Chicago and was called off just as UIC students were joining the pickets and getting ready to walk out of classes.

At UIC, the AFT was determined to prevent a broader struggle of grad students and faculty against the UIC administration, which could have quickly developed into a political conflict with the union-backed billionaire Democrat Illinois Governor, J. B. Pritzker, along with other state and local Democrats.

Far from uniting the struggles of grad students, the AFT and SEIU have isolated Loyola, Northwestern and U of C grad workers and are opposed to a city-wide walkout. But a united struggle is exactly what is needed.

Students must study the lessons of teacher struggles and draw the necessary conclusions. If a strike is called, the GSU will do everything it can to end it as soon as possible. Even if the GSU is recognized as a union, it will act as a vehicle of the AFT to ultimately betray the demands of grad student during future contract negotiations.

Grad students need an organization to fight the political forces arrayed against them. But they must be democratically controlled by educational workers themselves and committed to fight for what they need, not what college administrators, corporate backers and big business politicians say is affordable.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality and the *World Socialist Web Site Teacher Newsletter* call for U of C grad workers to build rank-and-file committees, independent of the AFT and GSU and opposed to the corporate-controlled politics of the Democrats and Republicans. These committees must fight for the broadest mobilization of the working class, including the more than 20,000 Chicago Public School employees whose contract expires at the end of June, and who have also been systematically betrayed by the Chicago Teachers Union.

The fight for the widest strike action by the working class must be combined with a new perspective, based on the independent political mobilization against both parties of social inequality, austerity and war, and for a socialist alternative.

Taking this struggle forward means rejecting the politics of the Democratic Socialists of America, Socialist Alternative and other pseudo-left groups that seek to tie workers and young people to the unions and the Democratic Party. We urge grad students to read the *World Socialist Web Site*, study the program of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality and join this fight today.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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