

University of Chicago graduate student union plans three-day picket

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Over 1,500 University of Chicago (U of C) graduate student workers will hold a three-day picket beginning Monday to demand recognition of Graduate Students United (GSU) as a union by U of C's administration. Last week, the GSU, of which the soon to-be striking graduate students are a part, announced grad student workers voted overwhelmingly to approve strike action.

U of C graduate students perform vital work for the university. They work as graduate and teaching assistants for professors in undergraduate courses, with some overseeing classes of their own. Additionally, they grade papers, administer labs and lead discussion groups, tutor one-on-one, all the while performing research and other critical duties as they study in PhD and Master's programs.

In anticipation of the pending picket, some U of C graduate students have already canceled classes for next week.

The GSU, an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the Illinois Federation of Teachers, has sought to win union recognition from U of C's administration since last year.

In February 2018, the GSU withdrew its official certificate of union representation from the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). The withdrawal was in response to growing fears that the new Trump appointed NLRB board would overturn the Columbia decision which granted graduate students the right to unionize at private universities.

The GSU has since sought for the U of C to voluntarily recognize the GSU as a union, which has occurred at other private universities, including New York University.

On Thursday night, the day the GSU announced the picket, John Boyer, the Dean of the College, which oversees undergraduate education, sent emails to

undergraduates, their parents and graduate students. In his emails to undergraduates and their parents, Boyer urged students to go to classes and cross picket lines. In his letter to grad students, he urged students to keep working, declaring, "I would like to remind all graduate-student members of our teaching community of the importance of upholding your instructional responsibilities to students in the College."

In an effort to block the GSU's union recognition, U of C's administration has attempted to define the work of graduate student workers as categorically something else. During an NLRB hearing between the U of C and the GSU, the university's legal counsel said the primary purpose of graduate students teaching undergraduates students is "to provide the graduate students with opportunities to practice their pedagogical skills." Adding that, "The benefit that the undergraduates may receive from that is inextricably linked to that process."

During the same hearing, U of C's legal counsel glibly proclaimed of graduate students, "They are not working, they are teaching."

U of C's resort to anti-democratic legalities is no doubt intended to slow down and demoralize graduate student workers. But more fundamentally, the naked attempt to define graduate student workers as anything but workers expresses the U of C's attempt to block the development of working class consciousness among students.

U of C's board of trustees, a group of millionaires and billionaires, are nervously watching the development.

Among the U of C's board of trustees is Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella who in 2017 received over \$25 million in compensation. Nadella has overseen the layoff of thousands of Microsoft workers. There's also

New York Times columnist David Brooks, a leading voice of America's financial aristocrats, who has urged Americans to die sooner so the government can save costs. The vast majority of the remaining trustees head parasitic hedge fund and investment companies, like billionaire Ken Griffin.

The combined wealth of everyone on the board could pay the tuition of all students for hundreds of years, if not more. The average yearly pay of a U of C graduate worker is roughly \$30,000, with many making less. Students are forced to pay grad fees and health insurance, which eat much of their income. The Student Life fee costs \$1,209 per year, while U of C health insurance costs \$4,398 annually.

This parasitic group is not the only one keeping over watch on graduate students. The heads of the AFT are actively watching what unfolds, ready to intervene in the case the picket expands beyond its official three-day limit. The politics of the AFT and its counterpart, the National Education Association (NEA), is pro-capitalist and adheres to the mandates of the Democratic Party, which in turn relies on the unions to suppress workers struggles and keep the class struggle at bay.

The GSU's decision to affiliate with the AFT, even for allegedly legal necessity as a steppingstone to form an officially recognized union, does not absolve the consideration of political questions.

The GSU leadership, conscious or not, shadows that of its parent organization. Like the AFT, the GSU is not seeking to fundamentally challenge the ownership and control of their workplace, in this case of the University of Chicago. Instead, it seeks to accommodate itself to the university administration, in brokering a contract which will do nothing to ultimately meet the needs of students. Limiting the student's action to a three day picket expresses the GSU's inability to wage a serious struggle.

This is because the unions have long ago shed any semblance of being workers' organizations. Today, they function as nationalist labor management, policing the working class in the interests of their "own" bosses. Tied by a thousand threads to the Democratic Party and capitalism, they cannot be reformed.

The backstabbing by the AFT and NEA of teachers struggles from last year's West Virginia wildcat strike to Los Angeles to the University of Illinois at Chicago confirms this. Similarly, the United Auto Workers, an

organization rife with corruption, has overseen the decimation of the livelihoods of autoworkers by working with the auto companies to close down factories and slash wages and benefits. The most recent example is the closure of GM factories in Ohio, Michigan, Maryland and Ontario, which will destroy 15,000 jobs.

Graduate student must break with the GSU and the AFT and form independent rank and file committees. Appeals should be made to U of C students, custodial and janitorial workers, nurses, professors and beyond to logistic workers, autoworkers and Chicago Public School teachers. The grounds must be developed for a general strike across the United States.

Ultimately, students must break with the politics of the pseudo-left, including the Democratic Socialist of America, and fight for a genuine socialist transformation of society, that does not appeal to the Democrats and the unions but to the international working class.

The wealth of the capitalist class, like those that oversee U of C, must be expropriated to guarantee quality education, housing, jobs, healthcare and access to culture to all.



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