

University of Chicago grad students disaffiliate from the American Federation of Teachers

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Graduate Students United (GSU), the aspiring union of graduate teaching and research assistants at the University of Chicago, announced June 9 that its members had voted to end their affiliation with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). The break is the result of the AFT's failure to gain recognition for the GSU over a ten-year period, and disputes with the AFT over the collection of dues and how the money is spent.

This case is only the latest in a series of bitter experiences grad students all across the country have had with AFT and other trade unions, which have claimed to "represent" them, only to cut deals with universities and state and local officials to maintain the poverty wages, substandard medical coverage and intense exploitation of teaching and research assistants.

In a statement released on GSU's website and shared on their social media platforms, the graduate union leadership wrote, "We are excited to announce that our membership has voted overwhelmingly to disaffiliate from the American Federations of Teachers (AFT) and to proceed as an independent union."

The statement explains that in January 2020 AFT had dropped its decade-long campaign with the GSU to seek official recognition as a union with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) after a new rule was passed classifying graduate student relations to private universities like the University of Chicago as "educational" rather than an employer-employee relationship.

GSU began its relationship with the AFT in 2010. Since then the GSU has been involved in futile attempts to pressure the university administration and the NLRB to recognize it as the legally sanctioned bargaining unit for grad students. Under the Obama administration, the NLRB had overturned a Bush-era Brown University precedent and held that Columbia University grad student workers were statutory employees who could unionize.

Although the AFT promoted illusions in Obama's NLRB, it took no action and a vote on union recognition was not scheduled until mid-2017, after Trump became president. On the eve of the vote, the university filed an appeal to halt the election, maintaining its position that grad students were not

employees and therefore did not qualify for union representation.

The NLRB did not rule before the vote took place in mid-2017. Although grad students voted 1,103–479 to unionize, with the appeal still pending, the vote was not legally binding, and the university refused to bargain with the GSU. In February 2018, the AFT-GSU withdrew its case fearing the Trump-appointed NLRB would reimpose the ruling that UC grad students had no right to unionize, setting a precedent that would block other unionizing efforts.

The last thing the AFT and its multi-millionaire president, Randi Weingarten, wanted was a serious fight by grad students against private universities and the Democratic Party. Instead, the AFT sought backroom talks, which no doubt included offers of sweetheart contracts, to get university officials to voluntarily agree to negotiate. In June 2019, the AFT-GSU called a three-day strike to allow grad students to blow off steam. The strike was isolated by the Chicago unions, including the AFT-aligned Chicago Teachers Union.

After the failure of the NLRB recognition campaign, the AFT decided to downgrade GSU's status. It was instructed to join AFT Academics (AFTA), an associate membership program linked to AFT with dramatically less resources for graduate workers to organize. To add insult to injury, GSU members would be required to pay mandatory dues to AFTA.

In response the GSU wrote that this "would go against our promise to membership that we would never pay mandatory dues until we had a contract." Up to this point union dues had been voluntary. According to the GSU statement, during discussion with Richelle Fiore, director of AFTA, GSU members were told that AFTA had no plan for their organization and they could not promise that dues would be used to advance the work of GSU at the University of Chicago. In addition, GSU writes that in every discussion held with graduate workers from other universities who are currently affiliated with AFTA they were urged not to join "citing AFTA's obstruction and hindering of campus action and lack of financial and organizational support."

Under these conditions, the GSU leaders found themselves

compelled to call for a vote on AFT disaffiliation or risk losing control of their membership. Even then, GSU dragged the process out another six months before rank-and-file grad students voted. GSU members were presented with two option: re-affiliation with AFT through the AFT Academics program or proceeding as an “independent union.” According to the GSU, members voted “overwhelmingly in favor of moving forward as an independent union, a decision we take very seriously.”

The orientation of the GSU leadership—which includes members from the Democratic Socialists of America and other pseudo-left organizations—is not towards any genuine independent action by grad students, let alone broader sections of the working class. Instead, after promoting illusions in the AFT for years, they are now encouraging illusions in other unions, including the Service Employees International Union and even the United Auto Workers union, which is currently engulfed in federal investigation over union officials taking bribes in exchange for signing sellout contracts.

In the recent University of California wildcat strike, graduate students were forced to rebel against the UAW, which signed a contract with wages so low they could not afford rent. The UAW, however, has reasserted its control and strangled the fight.

The UAW did the same thing to Harvard grad students, shutting down its strike against the Ivy League school with no contract and no agreement on the central demands of striking grad students.

For years, outfits like the DSA and pseudo-left organizations have claimed that the election of supposedly militant leaders committed to “social justice” to top union positions would transform the unions into fighting organizations. While this has certainly opened up many career opportunities for members of the DSA, the now-defunct International Socialist Organization (ISO) and similar organizations, it has done nothing to transform the anti-working class character of the unions.

Nowhere has this been shown more clearly than in the Chicago Teachers Union, led by former ISO leader Jesse Sharkey, which has colluded with the Democratic Party in the closing of scores of schools, the layoff of thousands of teachers and the acceleration of the privatization of public education.

The decades-long degeneration of the unions and their transformation into open instruments of the employers and the austerity program of both parties goes beyond the question of corrupt leaderships. Instead, the corrupt leaders have evolved organically from the pro-capitalist and nationalist program of the unions and their decades of collusion with the Democratic Party in the destruction of the jobs and social rights of the working class.

Grad students at the University of Chicago certainly need organization to collectively assert their rights. 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 up much of their income. The

Student Life fee costs \$1,209 per year, while U of C health insurance costs \$4,398 annually. Most students are burdened with large student loan debts.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) and the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) call for graduate students to form their own rank-and-file committees, independent of all of the pro-capitalist unions. The “sanctioning” of these committees will depend not on the rulings of the NLRB but the authority and active support they win among student workers based on their program and commitment to fight for the interests of grad students.

This means rejecting the austerity demands by university officials and state and local Democrats and Republicans, which will only intensify as a result of the pandemic-fueled economic and social crisis. Rank-and-file committees will begin with what is necessary for grad students—decent wages, full health care coverage, control over working conditions and hours and the elimination of student debt—regardless of what the authorities say is affordable.

Graduates must link their struggle with the undergraduates and together turn to the working class. The graduate student rank-and-file committees will build connections with Amazon workers, autoworkers, nurses, teachers and the countless other workers who are in struggle against the homicidal return to work policy amid a pandemic, and austerity, even as Trump and both corporate-controlled parties hand over trillions to prop up the stock markets and corporate America.

The struggle over day-to-day working conditions, including the right to a safe and secure job, must be fused with a political counteroffensive by the whole working class against the capitalist system and for a radical redistribution of wealth and the socialist reorganization of the economy to meet human need, not private profit.

Students and workers at the University of Chicago and elsewhere who want more information on building rank-and-file committees and linking this to a political struggle for socialism should contact and join the IYSSE and the Socialist Equality Party.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact