

University of Michigan graduate students strike over pandemic danger

Our reporters
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The University of Michigan graduate employee organization (GEO) announced on Monday that its members will engage in a four-day strike beginning today in opposition to the unsafe return for in-person learning. The struggle involves more than 1,000 graduate student instructors and graduate student staff assistants at the university.

Strikers, who previously voted by more than 80 percent to support a walkout, expressed their determination to fight in a general membership online meeting held Monday night, which was attended by over 600 members.

In a Monday press release, GEO officials said they presented their demands in an open letter to University of Michigan administrators, “which was signed by over 1,800 graduate workers and community members.” The demands include improved testing and contact tracing, a universal right to work remotely without documentation, care subsidy for parents and caregivers, a \$2,500 unconditional emergency grant, and rent freezes.

The university’s Office of Public Affairs rejected the demands, claiming they were not “financially feasible.” This led to today’s strike.

There is wide-spread opposition to the reckless drive to reopen schools among graduate students, undergraduate students, faculty and staff at the university. The strike has already received significant support from undergraduate students on social media.

The Office of Public Affairs has responded by posting a statement claiming the strike violates state law and that the university is “preparing to continue operations, including classes, in the event of a strike.”

There is enormous anger and outrage on campus to the reckless plans of the university administration and UM president Mark Schlissel. A letter published in the

Michigan Daily by a staff member at the university stated:

President Schlissel demeaned worker demands for widespread testing as “science fiction” that was “not essential.” But a study out of Harvard and MIT said there was no way to prevent a near-total outbreak without testing everyone on campus every two days. Another Harvard expert said Schlissel showed “a fundamental misunderstanding of the purpose of testing.”

President Schlissel proclaimed the University’s efforts were informed by our top public health experts. But a U-M respiratory infectious disease expert told *The Michigan Daily* that none of the colleagues she’s spoken with believe the University’s reopening plan is safe, and top experts nationwide harshly criticized Schlissel’s “lack of commitment to keep[ing] everybody safe.”

The determination of the graduate student workers to fight the criminal in-person reopening policy at University of Michigan is part of a broader opposition among workers and students across the country to fight the irrational, anti-scientific and criminal policies of the ruling class during the pandemic, which places tens of millions of lives in danger. This includes protests by college students in Iowa and other states and hundreds of protests by public school educators.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at University of Michigan commends the rank-and-file graduate students for taking this

courageous stand and calls on all students, faculty, staff and workers in the area and more broadly to support the students and teachers in this fight.

Grad students need organization to fight but they cannot be fooled by the false claims that the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), with which the GEO is affiliated, or for that matter the NEA, the United Auto Workers (UAW) or any of these other state-sanctioned unions “represent” educators. Bitter experience has shown the opposite: the AFT and other unions have spent decades colluding with state and district officials in the systematic undermining of teachers’ conditions, the closure of schools, budget cuts and school privatization. As result, the AFT, NEA, UAW and other unions have lost so many members that they have sought to unionize grad students to make up for lost union dues.

But this has only led to a trail of tears for grad students, including the sellout of recent struggles at the University of California, the University of Chicago (where grad students disaffiliated from the AFT) and Columbia University.

The unions defend the capitalist system, are aligned with the corporate-controlled Democratic Party, and subordinate the interests of workers to needs of the financial oligarchy that runs America. The AFT and NEA are now campaigning for Biden even though as vice president under Obama he oversaw a vast attack on teachers and public education. But unlike Trump and the Republicans, the Democrats protect the financial and institutional interests of unions like the AFT whose major slogan has been “school reform with us, not against us.”

A fight is necessary and possible. But grad students must organize a rank-and-file strike committee, answerable to university workers not the unions and the Democratic Party, to wage a real fight against the deadly return to in-person schooling.

This strike committee should link up the grad students’ struggle with other campus workers and faculty, as well as rank-and-file autoworkers, Amazon and other logistics workers, retail and service workers. Instead of a four-day strike that will produce nothing, this committee should fight for an indefinite strike, calling for solidarity action from teachers in Ann Arbor and Detroit, college workers and students around the state, and broader sections of the working class to fight

for the closure of unsafe schools and defeat any attempt by U of M administrators to victimize strikers.

The conditions facing graduate students are part of a broad process of deepening exploitation of all sections of workers by the ruling class, which has been accelerated in the context of the pandemic with a back-to-work drive intended to drive up profits after trillions were handed to Wall Street through the CARES Act.

In a state where the Gilbert, Ilitch, DeVos, Stryker and Ford interests control billions of dollars, there is plenty of money to provide high quality remote learning, free high-speed internet and social protections against evictions and poverty.

What is needed is an industrial and political counter-offensive by the working class against both big business parties and the capitalist system they defend. While the giant corporate and political interests behind the University of Michigan’s attack on grad students speak for death and austerity, the working class must fight for socialism and life.

Last month, teachers from around the country established the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to unite educators, parents, and students and prepare for a general strike to halt the reckless opening of schools. Safety committees, which are independent of the unions, are being set up in Michigan, Florida, Texas and other states.

The Socialist Equality Party urges that teachers, parents, and students who are concerned about the rapid spread of COVID-19 in schools should **register** for the next meeting of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which will be held Saturday, September 12, at 3 p.m.



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