

“We have lit a match that could unite a global wave”

University of Michigan grad students reject administration offer, continue strike against unsafe conditions

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In an act of tremendous courage, striking graduate student instructors at the University of Michigan voted by more than 700 to 400 to reject a proposal from the university administration and continue their strike to demand the shutdown of in-person learning amidst the coronavirus pandemic.

The “offer” from the university administration failed to meet the strikers’ main demands. On the demand for a universal right to work remotely, the university’s only offer was that grad students could work remotely during a period of arbitration if they were required to work in-person against their will. On the demand for the demilitarization of the campus, the university agreed only to have two meetings per term to hold further discussions.

The university also agreed to disclose the methodology it had adopted for testing, but would not increase its testing capacity.

The struggle at the University of Michigan is part of a broader fight against the reopening of campuses. In an indication of the catastrophic impact of school reopenings throughout the country, the University of Wisconsin-Madison announced Wednesday that it is moving all classes online after a surge of COVID-19 cases, with more than 1,000 infections over the past several days. Similar outbreaks have occurred on other campuses, endangering the lives not only of students, but also the broader community.

The vote Wednesday rejected the position of Graduate Employees’ Organization (GEO) President Sumeet Patwardhan, who urged that the offer be accepted. In the course of the meeting, many students, including sections of the GEO leadership, spoke passionately against the deal, shifting the sentiment in favor of continuing the struggle.

The vote was held in the face of blackmail from the UM Board of Regents, made up of powerful Democrats, including billionaire Little Caesars owner Denise Ilitch and

Jordan Acker, the former assistant to Obama’s secretary of the Department of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano.

The university threatened to take retaliatory action against striking students if they rejected the deal, saying it was “considering all options available,” according to the *Michigan Daily*. The administration also said its offer would “explode” if it was not immediately accepted, meaning any guarantees against retaliation in it would no longer be on the table.

The strike began Tuesday, a little more than a week after 45,000 students began classes. The walkout immediately garnered popular support, with construction workers honoring picket lines on campus, faculty joining picket lines, and residential advisors in the dorms joining the strike on Wednesday. Professors at outlying UM campuses, including in Dearborn, canceled classes. Solidarity messages were sent by grad students at Columbia University and other campuses.

In interviews on the picket line Wednesday, students expressed a determination to fight. “This is exciting,” said Ayana. “Something has to change. This is the first strike, but it is going to be one of many in the fight for a socialist future and real equality. We have to shake up the world. Those at the top fear this movement and are concerned that they are going to lose their wealth and power. The laws are written for them, not us.”

“We’ve been screwed over by the Democratic Party,” Ayana added. “They are not committed to actual change. They work within the system, telling us they will be less bad—but there won’t be real equality. This is a class society. My mother is an Amazon worker who was homeless, and now she is fighting for sanitizer and a safe workplace. This is capitalism, and we have to end it.”

Since August there have been at least 35,000 new cases of COVID-19 at over 1,000 campuses, with outbreaks in Iowa,

North Carolina and other states. Under these conditions, the strike at UM has become a focal point for opposition to the homicidal back-to-school policy, which includes the return of some 50 million students to public schools across the country.

There is no doubt that the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the parent organization, exerted pressure on the GEO to shut down the strike before it became a catalyst for an expanding movement against the reckless back-to-school policy, which in Michigan is being spearheaded by the Democratic Party. Seeking to isolate the UM strike, AFT President Randi Weingarten, a leading official in the Democratic Party, did not even bother to issue a tweet about it.

Within the working class, however, there is powerful support for the stand taken by the students. The determination not to betray this support was a major factor in the rejection of the administration's offer.

One striking student told the WSWS, "There's no power for the workers unless there's solidarity among the working class. Already we've seen the University of Michigan's Res Life staff go on strike to show their support for our work stoppage!

"The issues with higher education extend far beyond the University of Michigan. The entire structure is built on the exploitation of labor under the pretense of offering a more affordable education. However, that pretense wouldn't need to exist if the education weren't commodified so heavily and so predatorily."

Speaking about the rise in social inequality in the US and the role played by the Democratic and Republican parties, he added, "Beyond higher education, our country is facing such horrific inequality issues that we have to band together as a working class, or we won't be able to overcome our present moment. I think that the Democratic and Republican parties do not serve the people or the working class in any capacity. They serve the owning class, they serve corporations, and the vast majority of politicians under those banners serve their own interests far before they serve the interests of their constituents."

Tim, a Chinese grad student, said, "We have lit a match that could unite a global wave. We need a change."

Alexis, an engineering senior, added, "The strike shows there is a growing opposition to the whole setup of society. The pandemic has exacerbated the contradictions of capitalism. In the US especially, it has brought out the inaccessibility of health care, education, making conditions even worse for workers. The pandemic has shown how unprepared the US is and the need for the redistribution of resources."

Ryan, a graduate student instructor, told the WSWS that

over the summer the GEO worked with the university. He explained, "We tried to follow their bargaining agreements, and they basically did nothing. We would have meetings with the university, and they would say all the 'right things' like 'we hear you' and 'we are working on it,' and they would just throw us to the side. It became apparent that they were not taking any of our demands seriously.

"Then they forced members of the union to teach in person with basically no protections. We decided to strike. We understand that our demands are going to apply to more than just us. This is a strike for more than just grad students."

When asked what he would say to other students and teachers around the country who want to fight back, Ryan said, "In this current environment, with the police murders, COVID-19, with the way the capitalist system and neoliberal university treat workers, we have to take a stand. There is just so much anger simmering below the surface among all these people. Once we provided the tool for people to speak out, there has been an unprecedented turnaround. It has been so remarkable. This moment we are in, it has the chance to turn the tables. It takes courage."

Strikers will return to picket lines this morning exhilarated by their courage and defiance. But if the struggle is to succeed, it must be broadened to the entire working class. This means turning directly to rank-and-file construction, health care and other workers at the University of Michigan and calling for solidarity action by teachers in Detroit and other cities, workers in the auto industry, at Amazon and other logistics firms, and in retail and service industries.

This strike must become the starting point for the development of a powerful industrial and political counteroffensive by the whole working class against both corporate-controlled parties and the capitalist system they defend.

Today, Thursday, September 10, at 7:00 pm, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality is holding a public meeting to discuss the strike and the way forward. We urge all students, workers and faculty in the Ann Arbor area to register today.



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