

University of Michigan strikers speak out: “We need to resist going back to normal. Normal no longer exists”

Our reporters
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Support continues to grow for striking graduate students across the University of Michigan campus and around the country. The strike launched by UM graduate student workers concluded its fourth day on Friday. The Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO) recommended to extend the strike for another week, which will be voted on by its membership over this weekend and is widely expected to pass in favor of the extension.

The strike at the University of Michigan is quickly turning into a focal point of a much broader opposition to the reckless reopening of both K-12 schools and college campuses everywhere.

Hundreds of students and supporters showed up at the picket lines Friday bringing food and supplies for the striking students. Residential Advisors (RAs) on campus also joined the strike on Thursday. The RAs along with a number of student groups, including the UMich Dining Workers, held a rally together with the GEO late Friday afternoon, attracting hundreds of students, staff and supporters. Construction workers and other trades workers initially honored the picket lines and shut down the job sites on South University in the morning.

Abigail, a striking graduate student, spoke to our reporters about the growing support of the strike. “I can say that the amount of solidarity in support of the strike is amazing. It is intoxicating. It keeps us going in the face of threats of retaliation from the University.”

She explained that support for the strike was spurred on after the GEO members rejected the university's sell-out offer to end the strike on Wednesday. “When I got out here on Tuesday, there were no supplies. A little bottle of sanitizer and no signs because they had melted in the rain.

“Yesterday and today [after the Wednesday vote] our original picket line of nine people turned into 40. We suddenly had signs for everybody, several megaphones

and very skilled drummers, and more food than we could eat.”

She continued, “Yesterday we handed the megaphone around on the picket line, and there were undergrads, RAs [residential advisors], lecturers, people from other unions and others who had nothing to do with the university who were marching with us. In two days it had turned from a small desperate strike that could not win into a movement.”

Another graduate student, who wished to remain anonymous, discussed the recent vote on Wednesday. “UM gave a sh*t offer, to be frank, and it was accompanied with threats. None of our demands were met.”

She continued, “I thought Wednesday night was incredibly inspiring [at the meeting to reject the offer]. At the beginning of the meeting there was a poll, and 70 percent were in favor of ending the strike because everyone was scared, probably. But then there was vigorous discussion about what we were fighting for—the demands on COVID and policing, the others in the same situation on campus—and it started to change. By the end it was 70 percent voting to reject the offer and in favor of continuing. I thought it was remarkable.”

Another graduate student worker from the Medical School commented on the broad character of the GEO demands: “I think our demands are critical and interconnected—both the COVID-19 demands and the demilitarization demands.”

He continued, “There's a lack of testing despite what the university is proposing, and it's a dangerous situation because we really don't know what's going on. Also they are increasing policing on campus, including recruiting students to be informal police through this thing called the Ambassador Program.

“We’re requesting a universal option to work remotely, but they won’t grant us that. They respond with language that makes it sound like we already had that option, but they won’t give us the universal option.”

He also discussed the poor conditions and precarious employment facing lecturers at the UM campuses and that such conditions were even worse at UM-Flint. The University of Michigan laid off nearly 41 percent of lecturers at the Flint campus earlier this year.

Francy, another striking graduate student, commented, “As we’ve seen for the last few days there’s a lot of strength for our movement. We’d rather be at home teaching, we love to teach! We care about our students, we can’t be with the university to kill our students by exposing them.”

She also spoke on some of the primary motivations of the strike, preventing COVID-19 infections due to unsafe conditions: “Corona isn’t just about death but maiming our community permanently. There’re cases where young people are asymptomatic and lose lung capacity. That’s really important!”

The strike has won significant support among faculty and staff, 489 of which signed a letter to voice their support. Part of the letter reads:

We are deeply disappointed that while so many of the University’s constituents bravely risk their livelihoods to raise grave concerns about public health and safety on campus, the administration has used procedures and technicalities to silence, delegitimize or ignore their concerns. ... We believe that those striking and protesting do so for the health and safety of both the university and surrounding community, envisioning a more robust and just culture of care that all members of our campus and neighboring communities deserve.

The strike has also reached well beyond the Michigan campus. Over a dozen graduate unions from universities across the country have issued solidarity statements. The Graduate Students Organizing Committee at New York University has also donated to the strike solidarity fund.

Noah, a graduate teaching fellow at Columbia, told the WSWS, “The graduate workers at Michigan are taking a remarkable action and putting themselves at great risk to fight for the better world that they imagine for themselves and their larger community.”

He continued, “One of the things that’s inspiring about this strike is that their demands are not limited only to their own contract. They are demanding decent support from their university under extraordinary circumstances, safe working conditions for everyone, and an end to cops on campus. And they’re willing to fight to make it happen!”

Referring to the solidarity statement issued by the Graduate Workers of Columbia University (GWC), Noah said, “GWC recognizes that the injustices that GEO are resisting are shared by all of us, on campuses across the country. When universities continuously show disregard or even contempt for their workers’ and students’ lives, we have to act collectively.” He explained that he was highly encouraged from “seeing other groups of workers joining the fight and supporting graduate students.

As Francy explained when asked about a nationwide general strike, “This has a real opportunity to change the world and how everything functions. We need to resist going back to normal. Normal no longer exists. Everyone has lost friends and family members. It’s bound to affect the entire society.”

In order to sustain the growing support for the strike of the graduate students and resident advisers it is critical that the struggle be expanded into broader sections of campus employees, nurses, educators, service workers and beyond. The International Youth and Students for Social Equality and the Socialist Equality Party are calling on students to turn to the working class and prepare for a nationwide general strike.



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