University of Michigan graduate student workers' strike at critical turning point

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The strike by more than 1,200 graduate student instructors at the University of Michigan is at a critical juncture. On Monday, the university requested that the Washtenaw County Circuit Court issue an injunction to force the Graduate Employees Organization (GEO) to end the strike. If grad students refuse, they could face contempt of court charges, financial penalties and the potential deportation of foreign students.

At the same time, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the parent union of GEO, has done everything to isolate the strike thus far, despite widespread support. Now it has intervened to take over negotiations with the university. At the GEO membership meeting Tuesday night, it was reported that David Hecker, the president of the AFT-Michigan, will take over talks.

Knowing that there is broad and growing support for the strike across the campus and across the country, both the Democratic Party-controlled university administration and the AFT are trying to crush the strike. They fear that the action by graduate student instructors is becoming a catalyst for a broader movement of public school teachers and other sections of the working class against the reckless campaign to reopen colleges and schools in the midst of the raging pandemic.

This must be opposed. Grad student instructors, residential advisors, faculty members, construction, maintenance and service workers and Michigan Medicine workers should establish a rank-and-file strike committee to carry out joint action to defend strikers against any legal action by the university and to expand the struggle beyond the campus.

On Tuesday, the university administration made it absolutely clear that it has no intention of agreeing to the main demand of the GEO workers: that grad student instructors have the guaranteed, documented right not to teach in person and be provided with other protections against the pandemic and its devastating social and economic consequences.

UM President Mark Schlissel hypocritically claimed that the university was seeking the strikebreaking injunction in order to protect the interests of students. "We want our students to learn without interference and we don't want anyone to feel threatened simply for wanting to go to class. Going to the court was our only choice after learning the strike would continue."

This is coming from a university president who has refused to provide universal testing and other basic protections for the 45,000 students returning to classrooms and dormitories, even as more than 55,000 infections are spreading at college campuses across the US. The only "threats" to students are coming from the campus administration and its powerful financial backers that have herded them back into school.

Over the last two days alone there have been reports of outbreaks that have shut down the UM's School of Dance, with at least 10 percent of the department potentially exposed to an outbreak. Outbreaks at two dormitories have forced dozens of students into forced quarantine where students are reporting on "prison-like" conditions on social media. There is a broad feeling that the university is downplaying or suppressing the real COVID-19 totals. One of the key demands of the striking GEO workers is that there be full, rapid and transparent testing for all guided by public health official policies and not university administration.

A professor at the prestigious School of Social Work forwarded an email to all of her students on Tuesday which the Dean had sent only to faculty. The email warned about positive COVID cases in the school and

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urged switching to online if the faculty hadn't done so yet. Students became furious throughout the day that this was being kept secret from them.

Abby, a PhD candidate in molecular biology and GEO member, told the World Socialist Web Site, "One of my biggest motivators is how much this affects more than just grad students. This strike isn't just about what it can do for grad students but also what it can spill over and do for everybody. I feel like I have this moral obligation to push that momentum as much as we can. Now that we've stuck our necks out, we can't stick them back in."

Construction workers, members of Operating Engineers Local 324, who were preparing to pour concrete at a campus building site expressed their support for the graduate instructors' struggle. "My kids are back in school, and it scares me," one said. "I feel for those kids on strike. Nobody should have to work with the pandemic." Commenting on the multi-trillion-dollar bailout of Wall Street, he added, "That money should've been used to take care of families during the pandemic.'

The University of Michigan GEO strike, which has now been joined by campus residence hall workers as well, is a courageous stand to protect the lives of students and university workers alike.

The back-to-work policy spearheaded by the ruling class and both political parties, which is hell-bent on ensuring that the working class pays for the trillions given to Wall Street in the CARES Act in March, will create an enormous surge in the death and illness among workers and students.

There is growing opposition to the reopening of colleges. Students and faculty at Iowa State University and the University of Iowa, an epicenter of the outbreaks, are organizing a joint strike this week. Opposition among students and workers is growing at San Diego State University (SDSU), University of California San Diego, University of Wisconsin, Cornell and other universities.

On Monday, 4,000 clerical, maintenance and other service workers walked out at the University of Illinois at Chicago and UI medical centers in Chicago, Peoria and Rockford to demand safe staffing levels, PPE protection and decent wages. The service workers joined 800 nurses at the University of Illinois Hospital (UIH) in Chicago who walked out Saturday over dangerous conditions and poor pay.

It is not to the Democrats and the union executives that students should turn, but to teachers, auto workers, service workers, health care workers and the entire working class. This means the strike must be expanded. A university-wide strike committee must be organized, drawing all sections of workers into the struggle and reaching out to the working class throughout the state. This must be combined with the development of a powerful political struggle against both corporate-controlled parties and for socialism.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality in the US is holding a national online meeting Thursday, at 8 PM EDT to organize students against the reckless reopening of schools. We urge students and youth toregister for the event today.

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