

Defying injunction threats, striking University of Michigan grad students call for “larger mobilization of working people”

Our reporters
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Striking graduate students at the University of Michigan are continuing their walkout in defiance of the strikebreaking threats by top administrators. Over the weekend, grad student instructors voted by 80 percent to continue their walkout to demand remote-only learning and other protections against the spread of COVID-19, just days after they overwhelmingly rejected the university’s contract “offer” that ignored their demands.

The university responded by filing a request Monday for the Washtenaw County Circuit Court to issue an injunction, and order the Graduate Employees’ Organization (GEO) to end the strike. The university made it clear that any grad students who defied a court injunction would be held in contempt of court, raising the specter of financial penalties for individual strikers and even more severe repercussions for international students.

Striking students denounced the university’s hypocritical claim to be driven by the needs of students, when they were exposing them and university workers to the deadly contagion, without sufficient testing and other safety protocols. On Tuesday, the dance building was closed for two weeks after 10 percent of the department was forced to quarantine.

In comments during a livestreamed event Tuesday, university president Mark S. Schlissel claimed that “across the nation testing is a limited resource” and that the university did not have the capacity for rapid result testing. However, Michigan is one of the top 10 richest universities in the nation, with an endowment of \$12.4 billion in 2019, up half a billion dollars from the year before. The university’s football program is the richest of the Big Ten Conference schools, bringing in more

than \$122 million every year.

These financial concerns are a major factor in the drive to reopen the university, and colleges across the country.

Striking grad students spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the issues in their strike. TJ, a fourth-year Ph.D. student in molecular, cellular, and developmental biology expressed his determination to carry on with this struggle. “We began this strike because demands for safety were not being met and attempts to communicate were largely ignored for months. Now that we’ve taken the last resort of a strike, our university is trying to use legal action against us rather than negotiate our demands.”

Explaining real fears over a campus-wide outbreak, he continued, “The outbreak at Michigan State University highlights exactly what we fear for our community at U of M. We were out again picketing today and will keep doing so as long as we can.”

Another Ph.D. student, DB, also spoke to this. “We’re terrified. This current testing rate puts the university and town at risk. Does admin truly care about the students, faculty and staff, or the town?”

Joel, a graduate student at the picket line held Monday in front of the university’s Detroit Center located in midtown Detroit told the WSWS that there is overwhelming support to extend the strike until this Friday. He said, “It’s 80 percent vote [to authorize the extension], and I believe I saw someone posted, actually more people voted just to extend the strike over the weekend than voted total in the initial strike vote. I think our union is really more mobilized than I’ve ever seen.”

At a general assembly held by the GEO Monday

morning to review this week's plans for the strike, the GEO reported that 2,400 people signed up for picketing shifts last week, which is more than twice as many as the total number of its members.

Residential Advisors (RAs) have also decided to strike and join the ranks of striking graduate students. University dining hall workers have also expressed solidarity and have supported the strike.

The strike has become a rallying point for student workers at UM but has also drawn support from other sections of workers, including local construction workers and autoworkers.

The issues facing student workers at UM are the same issues facing the working class more broadly. Workers are being forced back to work in unsafe conditions in order to further enrich the financial oligarchy who have benefited immensely from the pandemic.

There is broad interest in expanding the strike at UM. As Irene, another graduate student at the picket line in Detroit Monday, argued, “[we] need to figure out how to make coalitions across campus.”

Joel spoke about the emerging oppositions on several other university campuses after the strike at U-M started. He stated, “I hope that our action helps inspire others to stand up for their rights to health and safety. It's really inspiring to see the level of support we receive from folks all across campus.” He continued, “I am hopeful this can be part of a larger mobilization of working people all across the metro area and beyond.”

Commenting on the importance of seeing the broad issues taken up by the strike, Irene said, “What's exciting about the strike is that we've set interdependent demands. Covid has shown how economic, political, health, schooling and housing issues are really one interdependent struggle. We can't have a safe and just campus unless we address all of those issues.”

Another striking graduate student, Emma, echoed this point and discussed the mass multiracial and multiethnic protests over police killings at the beginning of June. She said, “A lot of people have been noticing that the George Floyd protests are deeply connected to the pandemic itself. The police are used to enforce social inequality. I think that everything here is completely interconnected. We cannot separate the issues that GEO is fighting for, the Covid demands from the policing demands.”

It is critical to understand the struggles of graduate students at UM within a broader context. The conditions facing the striking graduate students are the same as those facing the whole working class. The only way to defend and secure this strike is by expanding it and turning to the working class. This includes setting up a rank-and-file strike committee to unite all university workers and to appeal for broader support throughout the working class to defend the striking workers and win their demands.

This is necessary because the unions, including GEO's parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers, and the United Auto Workers are deliberately trying to isolate the UM strike because they support the back-to-school and back-to-work drive pushed by Trump and the Democrats.

There is enormous support for the strike among rank-and-file teachers and autoworkers who are setting up rank-and-file safety committees to coordinate their resistance. Autoworkers at plants around the country have given statements of solidarity and support, which were read to strikers by a member of the Socialist Equality Party at a GEO general assembly meeting held Monday. After each statement was read, a warm applause and cheer came from the crowd. In one statement, an autoworker from the Ford Dearborn Truck Rank-and-File Safety Committee, stated “A general strike is a must to put a stop to this back-to-work and back-to-school madness.” This received a round of cheers.



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