

American Federation of Teachers shuts down University of Michigan graduate student strike

Our reporters
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Striking graduate student instructors at the University of Michigan were browbeaten into ending their nine-day strike at a quickly convened meeting of the Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO) last night.

The end of the strike occurred less than 24 hours after the American Federation of Teachers-Michigan President David Hecker assumed control of negotiations with the university and produced an agreement that was virtually identical to the one the grad students rejected just a week ago by a margin of 700 to 400.

The snap meeting was called before anyone was able to review the agreement. It took place just days after the university filed for a preliminary injunction to halt the strike by 1,200 grad students, and the GEO leadership repeatedly pointed to threat of financial penalties as the main reason that the strike had to be ended.

After a four-hour meeting, which included several strikers speaking passionately against the offer, the GEO members voted 1,074 to 239 to accept the deal, with 66 abstentions.

The walkout began on September 8, a little more than a week after the university started classes for 45,000 students without adequate testing and other safety measures to protect both students and university workers from COVID-19. The strikers quickly won support for their demands to be able to refuse in-person instruction, transparency over the spread of infections and broader issues, including police presence on the Ann Arbor campus.

At no point during the walkout, even after the university filed for an injunction, did the AFT, with which the GEO is affiliated, do anything to support the strike. Instead they instructed the AFT-affiliated unions on the campus, the Lecturers Employee Organization (LEO) and the United Physician Assistants of Michigan (UPAMM), to keep their members at work.

The AFT in Michigan and nationally has facilitated the opening public schools and suppressed strikes and other actions by teachers fighting to protect their lives, including in New York City and Detroit. Far from mobilizing public school teachers in joint action against unsafe conditions, the AFT

moved to shut down the UM strike before it encouraged similar walkouts by public school teachers.

Like universities across the country, which have been opening up as the pandemic continues to rage, the University of Michigan was driven entirely by corporate considerations, including tuition and housing revenue. Earlier this week, the Big Ten athletic conference announced that college football games would resume next month. The University of Michigan has the richest football program in the Big Ten, bringing in \$125 million a year.

The strike pitted grad students against the Democratic Party, which controls the university and the state of Michigan. UM President Mark Schlissel insisted that university—which has an endowment of \$12.5 billion—did not have the resources for regular testing, even though student athletes will get daily rapid-result testing.

The deal accepted by GEO ignores the striking students' major demands, including the universal right to work remotely without documentation. In the previous offer that was rejected, if a graduate student was forced to work in-person, the university offered them an expedited mechanism to process their complaints, where GEO and the HR would meet in two days to come to a resolution. If this student disagreed with the resolution reached, they could enter an arbitration process and were allowed to work remotely before the final ruling.

In the agreement that was adopted, the only change is to replace the arbitration process with a three-person panel made up of one person selected by GEO, one by the university and a third mutually agreed upon. This will only incorporate GEO into the effort to blackmail student instructors back into the classrooms. As one student said during the meeting, "It's cooptation and surrender because they will decide every board room, every rep, every well-behaved POC—this is crap."

The GEO had also demanded an extension of the program timeline for students to complete their graduate studies due to health concerns and other causes and other emergency subsidies for all graduate students. The deal basically kicked the ball back to each department for them to decide on their own.

On GEO's "defunding" and "abolishing" the police on campus demand, the university only agreed to consider suggestions and feedback from the Students of Color Liberation Front (SOCLF) regarding police presence on campus. The university also promised to establish a task force on policing at UM to involve both the SOCLF and GEO.

The agreement will further integrate GEO into the racist politics of the university and the Democratic Party, which is aimed at dividing students along racial lines and promoting the interests of an affluent section of minority students seeking academic positions and political careers.

During the meeting, there was a deliberate effort to inject racist politics to bully students into accepting the deal on the bizarre basis that to continue the strike would hurt minorities. One GEO leader who said she was with a leadership group within the GEO representing black students, said rejecting the deal would "endanger the lives of black and brown students."

Explicitly opposing the growing sentiment in the working class for common action against the deadly pandemic and the criminal indifference of the American ruling class, she said, "We are not headed toward a general strike, we are headed for defeat. To continue the strike is to put black and brown lives at risk."

None of those supporting the agreement bothered to explain how dropping a fight against the criminal reopening of universities, colleges and public schools would protect the lives of students of any race.

Many graduate students, both in the voice contributions and in the chat, favored rejecting the new offer and continuing the strike. One student wrote, "We could have a general university strike on our hands. That would force them to back down."

Another wrote that the terms of the deal "will still result in the same amount of infection, the same amount of risk, same amount of potential death. It doesn't seem as though the university has given us much say, much real power." He continued, "People are looking at us. They are watching this story. How do we want the story to end? Is this acceptable? Is this the precedent we want?"

"Full remote is one of the strongest demands we have and the lack of it is why I reject the offer," another wrote. "It's directly related to workplace safety. I remember in lab safety training that one of the most effective safety controls is elimination and substitution (i.e. remote learning), while the weakest is PPE. Considering the infrastructure UM has and could provide (Zoom, laptops, etc.), any in-person class is just completely unnecessary risk."

"Seriously, are we willing to even risk the death of one student? One of my students already has COVID, and we're lucky that other students won't get infected because we went fully remote. I won't wait until we have our first student martyr. It's universal remote or bust for me. And the resources/money/support needed to facilitate the shift is not an issue considering the funds UM has."

Several comments pointed out that adequate testing was well within the reach of an institution with the resources of University of Michigan, as was shown by the testing of UM football players. "Actual testing isn't a hard ask. It's egregious that we would accept this paltry excuse of an offer when just today it was announced that the football team would be tested daily. It's embarrassing." Another added, "If they can test athletes, they can test grad students, RAs, dining hall workers, bus drivers. Five bus drivers have already died from COVID."

The issues raised in the strike go far beyond the Ann Arbor campus. Colleges and universities are being opened for 20 million students and public schools for another 50 million students as part of the back-to-work drive by the Trump administration, with the support of state Democrats like Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer. The American ruling class has essentially adopted the policy of "herd immunity" and is prepared to see hundreds of thousands, if not millions, more die in order to restart the flow of corporate profit.

In the US, deaths are nearing 200,000 people, and there are estimates that the number will reach 400,000 by January. There is enormous opposition to this, with the UM strike only one expression of growing social opposition. The fight against this criminal indifference to the lives of workers and young people can only be advanced by unifying and mobilizing the strength of the working class. This means a conscious political fight against the Democratic Party and the pro-capitalist trade unions.

New forms of working-class resistance must be formed, including rank-and-file safety committees to oppose the sacrifice of workers' lives for corporate profit. The pandemic and the economic and social disaster it has produced can only be addressed through the building of a powerful political movement of the working class aimed at establishing workers' power and the socialist reorganization of society.

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



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