Lessons of the University of Michigan graduate student strike

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (US)
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The nine-day strike by 1,200 graduate student instructors and staff assistants at the University of Michigan ended on September 16. Despite the courageous stand by grad students and the broad support for the struggle, the strikers were unable to win their basic demands, including the right to work remotely during the pandemic.

A week after 45,000 students returned to the Ann Arbor campus without adequate protections for university workers and students alike, the Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO) launched a four-day strike on September 8 to demand the universal right to work remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic, improved testing and contact tracing, care subsidies for parents and caregivers, a $2,500 unconditional emergency grant, rent freezes, and the demilitarization of the university campus.

The work stoppage immediately garnered immense support from undergraduates, lecturers, faculty, staff, university workers and countless supporters around the country. On campus, the Residential Advisor (RA) staff workers—treated as de facto front-line health care workers in the highly contagious student dormitories—joined the strike, dining hall workers threatened to do so, and construction workers on campus projects initially honored GEO picket lines.

Right from the beginning, however, the grad students confronted major obstacles to achieving their aims. First, the University of Michigan, whose board of regents is dominated by top corporate and financial executives, primarily connected to the Democratic Party, was determined to fully open up the school. Chiefly concerned with the potential loss of revenue from room and board and the university's football program, UM officials immediately denounced the strike as "illegal" and threatened to take court action against the GEO and individual strikers.

Second, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), with which the GEO is affiliated, feared that the strike could become a catalyst for a far broader movement of educators against the reopening of schools and colleges, which the AFT fully supports. The AFT officials also feared that a direct political confrontation between grad students and the Democratic Party, which runs the university and the state government, would do damage to its campaign for Joe Biden.

A major turning point took place on the night of September 9, when GEO President Sumeet Patwardhan attempted to push through the university's proposal and end the strike. However, strikers, inspired by the growing support for their fight, rejected the proposal by 700 to 400 and voted to continue their strike.

This bold action took place as student groups from around the country issued open letters and statements of support. Dozens of these schools were also organizing sickouts and protests of their own, including at the University of Iowa, Iowa State University, Columbia University, UC-Santa Cruz (UCSC), University of Illinois-Chicago (UIC), San Diego State University, and other schools.

During the graduate student strike, nearly 4,000 University of Illinois Hospital staff members and 800 nurses also went out on strike against deadly working conditions and for better pay. These struggles followed the walkouts and protests by autoworkers, meatpackers, health care workers, service workers, Amazon workers, students and others during the pandemic.

The defiance of the grad students set off alarm bells in the Lansing offices of Governor Gretchen Whitmer, the AFT-Michigan and well beyond. Within days, the university filed for a preliminary injunction to break the strike. The AFT moved in to take over negotiations with the university and promptly signed a deal which was essentially the same as the one that strikers overwhelmingly rejected the week before.

Once again, immense pressure was exerted on striking grad students to bow to the university's ultimatum, and despite strong resistance, the deal was rammed through and the strike ended.

All of the fundamental issues motivating the striking students and their supporters remain. In fact, just days after the end of the strike, multiple COVID-19 outbreaks were reported on the university campus in Ann Arbor.

Drawing the political lessons of this experience is critical for educators and young people across the US and internationally as they come to fight the criminal policy of reopening schools and universities.

What were the political issues raised in the GEO strike?

In addition to the immediate financial interests of the University of Michigan, there are far broader economic and political concerns behind the ferocious effort to stop any resistance to the reopening of public schools and colleges across the country. The strike developed in the midst of a campaign by the Trump administration to normalize the spread of infections and death even as the number of fatalities in the US surpasses 200,000, with projections for the end of 2020 of over 400,000.

Whatever their rhetorical differences with Trump and pronouncements about the "safe reopening" of schools and colleges, the Democrats have effectively adopted the administration's policy of "herd immunity" in which the virus is allowed to spread without restraint. In the eyes of the corporate and financial elite, if millions die, especially the elderly and sick, this will be an opportunity to loot their pensions, Social Security and medical benefits.

At first, both parties concealed the danger of the virus from the public, fearful of triggering "panic" on the stock market and provoking COVID-related job actions, which took place nevertheless. After the multi-trillion-dollar CARES Act bailout of Wall Street was signed into law in late March (with the near unanimous backing of Congress, including Bernie Sanders and other so-called progressive Democrats), both parties were determined to reopen businesses and return workers to producing profits to pay for the mountain of government and corporate debt. For workers to be herded into the factories, the schools had to be reopened.

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In other words, the UM grad student strike was part of the growing class struggle by workers against the bipartisan policy of sacrificing lives to boost the private fortunes of billionaires who have seen their net worth jump $250 billion while death and contagion spread across the world.

In Michigan, Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer signed off on reopening all schools across the state, placing millions of lives in potential danger. The same is true of other Democratic governors, including JB Pritzker in Illinois, Andrew Cuomo in New York and Gavin Newsom in California. As for Biden, a long-time shill for Wall Street, his chief concern has been that the growth of opposition to Trump does not erupt into a direct challenge to the capitalist system that the Democrats, just as much as the Republicans, defend.

For the corporate and political establishment, the UM strike was seen as another unmistakable sign of the radicalization of workers and young people and the growth of anti-capitalist sentiment, triggered by the criminal response to the pandemic, the worst economic and social crisis since the Great Depression, endless police killings and Trump's efforts to build a fascist movement.

Who were the allies and who were the enemies?

From the onset of the struggle, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) fought to break the union's isolation of the struggle, expand it beyond the campus by directly appealing to teachers, autoworkers and other sections of the working class. We insisted that the struggle facing grad student employees was not a trade union, but a political struggle. The fight against the pandemic, the subordination of human life to corporate profit, and the dangers of state repression and fascism, the IYSSE insisted, could only be advanced on the basis of building a powerful political movement of the working class against capitalism and for socialism.

To defend striking students from threats of retaliation, the IYSSE called for the establishment of a university-wide strike committee, independent from the AFT, the United Auto Workers (UAW), the construction trades and other corporatist unions. This committee, we said, should carry out a university-wide strike, reach out beyond the campus and fight for a nationwide strike against the unsafe opening of schools and workplaces.

On the other side, there was every effort to smother the strike by the trade unions and the Democrats. AFT President and Democratic National Committee member Randi Weingarten, who never once even publicly acknowledged the strike, did everything possible to isolate the student-workers and pressure them to accept a rotten deal. The AFT did not even mobilize the two other unions it has on campus with the highly exploited lecturers (Lecturers Employee Organization-LEO) and physician assistants (University Physician Assistants at Michigan Medicine-UPAMM).

After graduate students voted to continue their strike, Michigan AFT President David Hecker became directly involved in negotiations. On September 12, Hecker and former UAW president Bob King, along with Democratic Socialists of America (DSA)-affiliated Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib, took part in a virtual Michigan town hall with Bernie Sanders. Hecker, King and the Democrats all gave a toothless "shout out" to the strike, while in the meantime Hecker was already assisting the forces being mobilized against the striking graduate students.

The betrayal of the strike was an object lesson in the role of the pseudo-socialism promoted by all those forces, including Sanders and the DSA who aligned with the capitalist Democratic Party.

What was the role of racial and identity politics in the strike?

Despite all the efforts to strangle the strike, an important opposition among the graduate students still emerged at the final vote, with some even demanding that the strike should be expanded to a general strike to protect workers' lives. To counter this, there was a deliberate and pernicious effort by a layer of students within the GEO to employ racialist politics against those who wanted to defend and expand the strike.

One of their arguments was that continuing the strike would put "black and brown lives at risk." The proponents of this claim did not bother explaining how dropping the fight against the homicidal school openings would protect the lives of students and instructors of any race and nationality. But they were not looking to make any rational argument. Instead, they were trying to intimidate oppositional students with specious accusations of "white privilege" in order to protect the deal the GEO reached with the university to set up a task force on policing, which will involve the so-called Students of Color Liberation Front and GEO.

While such a deal might help advance the careers of those involved, it will do nothing to stop police violence in Ann Arbor or anywhere else, as countless examples of integrating police forces, sensitivity training and government oversight has proven. That is because police repression is above all a class question aimed at defending the wealth and power of the ruling class.

The long and violent history of class struggle in the United States proves that when the police are called in to put down opposition, they do not discriminate. The increasing violence committed against the ongoing multi-racial protests against police violence is also a sharp demonstration of this historical fact.

The racialist politics employed to justify an end to the strike was in line with the response of the Democratic Party to the eruption of mass, multi-racial and multi-ethnic demonstrations against police violence following the murder of George Floyd in late May. By promoting the lie that police repression is an expression of the violence of "white America" against "black America," the Democrats and their allies worked to suppress the class issues and block the development of a united movement of the entire working class against inequality and capitalism.

The way forward

Throughout the entire strike, members of the IYSSE and Socialist Equality Party campaigned in defense of the strike and fought to clarify the major political issues facing students. Above all, this meant a turn to the revolutionary force in society: the working class.

SEP Presidential candidate Joseph Kishore issued a statement on September 11, distributed at the picket lines, which outlined this issue sharply:

> Within academia, a great deal of energy has been devoted to arguing against the centrality of class conflict. The basic truth of Marxism, that the history of mankind is the history of class struggle, was supposedly superseded by conflicts centered on race, gender and other identities. Even the notion of objective truth was denied in the post-modernist attack on 'metanarratives.' The conception that the problems of mankind could only be resolved through the revolutionary mobilization of the working class against the capitalist system was to be relegated to a distant past.
>
> The pandemic, however, has refuted these conceptions.

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> Capitalism stands exposed as a historically bankrupt social and economic system. The overthrow of this system requires the mobilization of workers throughout the world on the basis of their common class interests. The wealth of the oligarchs must be seized, and the gigantic corporations and banks turned into public utilities. The expropriators must be expropriated.

The response of the ruling class to the pandemic has vastly accelerated all the underlying contradictions of American and world capitalism. As a consequence of the policy of “herd immunity,” more than 200,000 people have already died in the United States, and hundreds of thousands more are expected to lose their lives in the coming months.

The United States has entered a period of unprecedented social, economic and political crisis. The ever more open break of the Trump administration with what remains of democratic forms of rule, including the threat to remain in power even if he loses the election, cannot be separated from the homicidal policy that the financial oligarchy is pursuing. The Democrats, meanwhile, are terrified of the development of a movement in the working class that will challenge in any way the interests of Wall Street and American imperialism.

The working class, however, is entering into struggle. The coming weeks and months will see explosive social eruptions—against the back-to-work and back-to-school campaign, against the threat of dictatorship and fascistic violence, against mass unemployment, against poverty and evictions, and against the endless wave of police violence. The urgent task is the building of a socialist leadership in the working class, to unite these struggles on the basis of a common program to abolish capitalism.

We urge all students committed to this fight to make the decision to join the IYSSE, the student and youth movement of the Socialist Equality Party, and take up the fight for socialism.

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