# Illinois State University graduate students vote “yes” to strike, union delays until fall

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On Thursday, April 22nd, the Illinois State University (ISU) Graduate Workers Union (GWU) affiliated with the Service Employee International Union (SEIU) Local 73, voted overwhelmingly to authorize strike action with 98 percent of graduate workers voting “yes.”

Workers’ demands include increasing the graduate students’ 9 month stipend above the obscenely low rate of $9,441, full access to health care and dental, and increased protection for international students who are often charged more in fees every semester. The elimination of mandatory administration fees taken from students’ paychecks every semester is also a key demand.

The results of the vote were delayed due to technical problems and the final vote count was not released until last Thursday. Almost immediately after the results of the vote were announced the GWU called for delaying the strike until the fall semester. On Friday, the GWU leadership held an online meeting open to all Teaching Assistant (TAs) to discuss the outcome of the vote. At the meeting, the union revealed to the graduate workers that, in fact, the strike was already in the process of being postponed until the fall.

The union leadership stressed to members that the strike authorization vote was not actually a vote to initiate a strike. Rather, it is a vote that allows the union to begin bargaining for a better contract with the university administration and allows them to call an actual strike vote if the bargaining committee deems it necessary. While this is technically true, the results of the vote authorization are quite clear: the rank and file are ready to strike for their demands, now.

The GWU claimed that with the pandemic still in effect, an immediate strike is not in the best interest of graduate student workers. The union leadership told the rank and file that delaying the strike to the fall will allow a “reset” to better organize members into a collective strike effort.

The reality is that the GWU-SEIU is allowing the university administration to secure the critical grading labor of Teaching Assistants at the end of the semester when it is most valuable. No doubt that there is a real effort underway to prevent simultaneous graduate student strikes across campuses around the country.

Graduate workers at Columbia University (CU), and New York University (NYU) are currently in the middle of strikes over similar issues. The CU and NYU graduate student workers are up against powerful political and financial interests in the university administrations. They are also in a struggle against elements in their own union—affiliated with the United Auto Workers (UAW)—which has done everything to starve the workers and keep their struggles isolated.

These struggles come on the heels of a significant strike of graduate workers last fall, the graduate students at the University of Michigan who waged a struggle over unsafe working conditions. The strike at U-M last fall was one of the earliest organized oppositions to the homicidal policy of the ruling class to force the reopening of schools during the pandemic. It was shut down eventually by the Graduate Employees’ Organization (GEO) under the pressure of its parent union, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the Democratic Party-controlled university administration.

There is no doubt that SEIU will seek to play the same role as the UAW at NYU and CU, and the AFT at the University of Michigan: to isolate, starve and sell out the graduate student workers it claims to represent. In order to carry their struggle forward, graduate workers at ISU must arm themselves with an

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understanding of the immense political interests that they are up against, including within their own union.

There are already many indications of the real interests of the SEIU. For example, on Thursday's general membership call, ISU grad student leaders raised the demand to have a contract free of "no strike" clauses. It was not mentioned, however, that SEIU Local 73 has negotiated contracts for Northwestern University and University of Illinois-Chicago that contain a "no strike" clause in their finalized agreements.

This is a common occurrence among graduate student unions. In fact, in 2018, the UAW negotiated a secret deal with the Columbia University administration, unbeknownst to the members of the GWC, to block any strike action—the most powerful tool at workers' disposal—for two whole years. Columbia is again seeking a "no strike" clause for the current contract in negotiation.

At another point in Thursday's discussion, a student raised the question of the strike fund. GWU leaders proposed that the students, who make hardly above the minimum wage, simply save their money to prepare in the event of a strike or host a fundraiser. It was never mentioned that, like all the major trade unions today, the SEIU sits on top of a strike fund of hundreds of millions of dollars. The UAW provided Columbia strikers a meager $275 a week --a starvation wage for any worker, let alone those who live in New York City, one of the most expensive cities in the world.

Graduate workers at ISU and at all other universities deserve to have their basic demands for living wages and health care met immediately. However, in order for the struggle to be taken forward, the necessary political conclusions must be drawn. Unions like SEIU and others are not working in the interest of these grad students and other workers. The union bureaucracies serve as little more than the labor police who intervene to keep any workers' struggles within an acceptable framework and to end them when profits are at stake.

A new political strategy and perspective is required. The International Youth and Students for Social Equality calls for the immediate linking up of graduate students across campuses. Above all, student workers must fight to expand their struggle into the working class more broadly, which confronts mass unemployment and social misery.

Right now, there is a continuing strike wave not only among grad students at ISU, NYU, Columbia University, and elsewhere, but among the international working class as a whole. In Brookwood, Alabama, 1,100 Warrior Met Coal miners are continuing to strike for fair wages after receiving massive pay cuts when the company declared bankruptcy five years ago. Hospital workers in Tunkhannock, Pennsylvania are striking against unsafe work conditions and continuing to work without a contract as a third surge of COVID-19 cases threatens their lives. These workers are also represented by the SEIU, which has failed to deliver on a fair contract. In fact, the union has announced they would end the strike before the weekend after a total of three days.

If the struggles of graduate workers are to succeed, their struggles must develop into a broader industrial and political mobilization of the entire working class. This will not happen through, but must be independent of, the corrupt union apparatus.

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