

University of Michigan lecturers prepare for possible strike as campus reopens

Matthew Brennan, Sam Wayne
27 August 2021

Over 1,600 lecturers at the three University of Michigan campuses could possibly go on strike next week, as in-person classes resume. The Lecturers Employee Organization (LEO) at U-M has been without a contract for over four months after its previous contract expired on April 20.

The LEO, a subsidiary of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT Local 6244), announced on August 9 that it was quitting its previous contract framework with the university and demanding an entirely new contract.

On August 20 the union announced it would be holding informational pickets on campus over the weekend to speak to students on move-in days at the Ann Arbor campus. In a press release, LEO stated that its members could vote to go on strike on September 5. Quitting the previous contract framework removes a “no-strike” clause agreed to by LEO in 2018.

One of the main demands among the lecturers is for adequate pay increases and pay parity across U-M’s three campuses: Ann Arbor, Dearborn and Flint. According to an NPR Michigan Radio report, lecturers at Flint who teach eight courses make \$41,000 in starting salary, while lecturers in Ann Arbor who teach six courses start at \$51,000. However, lecturers do not always get to teach full course loads and are often hired on a part-time basis. One Dearborn lecturer quoted in the Michigan Radio report, for instance, stated she has taught as many as 13 courses across three different departments a year to make her salary.

Other demands raised include an increase in money for child care, more protection from burdensome workloads and rejection of a new felony disclosure policy at U-M, among other issues.

The university has thus far rejected demands for pay increase proposals that bring Flint and Dearborn lecturers into alignment with Ann Arbor lecturers, claiming the university cannot sustain such an increase. It has also

rejected additional child care subsidies. The claim of poverty is, of course, absurd as the university sits on an endowment of over \$12 billion, with \$3.1 billion in unrestricted financial reserves, making it one of the wealthiest universities in the country.

The number of U-M administrators earning over \$100,000 annually has reportedly tripled over the last 15 years, while 41 percent of lecturers at UM-Flint were laid off between 2019 and 2020. Dearborn and Ann Arbor laid off 12 percent and 8 percent of their lecturers during that time as well, respectively.

At most colleges and universities across the US, lecturers and graduate student workers teach a large proportion of the undergraduate courses, often while enduring high levels of exploitation and job insecurity. At U-M, lecturers teach 39 percent, 58 percent and 60 percent of the undergraduate courses at Ann Arbor, Dearborn and Flint, respectively.

Many lecturers are hired on a semester-by-semester basis. To supplement inadequate pay, they will often teach at more than one college or university per semester. For many lecturers, making ends meet means struggling to balance high workloads and chaotic schedules, with little prospect for long-term job stability or advancement.

Generally, lecturers must also have advanced degrees and training to teach at the college level. As a result, many incur debilitating levels of student loan debt. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2016 the average debt for those with a master’s degree was \$54,500 at public schools and \$71,900 at private schools. The average debt for Ph.D. holders is \$159,625, according to an August 2021 report on Educationdata.org.

While low pay and job insecurity have rightly been the central concerns of the U-M’s lecturers, the dangerous return to in-person learning amid the current surge of the highly infectious Delta variant has not been raised publicly by either the university or LEO-AFT. Lecturers,

students and staff face a public health disaster that is placing their lives in jeopardy. Classrooms will be central vectors of infection this fall. The fight to protect educators and students amid the Delta variant surge must become a central component of the lecturers struggle for a decent contract.

Teachers unions in the US and globally have been at the forefront of promoting the unsafe return to in-person teaching. The AFT itself is overseeing a nationwide push to reopen schools and send millions of teachers and students into harm's way. In the Chicago Public Schools, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) endorsed plans to reopen schools and force teachers into unsafe conditions—even agreeing to reduce social distancing recommendations from six feet to three feet. The Detroit Federation of Teachers, also an AFT union, is playing a similar role for the Detroit Public Schools Community District, as unvaccinated children are being sent back to schools.

As K-12 schools reopen this month, hundreds of thousands of students and teachers have already been infected. Moreover, scientists are beginning to uncover the long-term consequences of infection, with a growing body of research revealing a link between COVID-19 infection and long-term consequences, including impairment of “cognitive functions.” Even with vaccination requirements, “breakthrough” cases are rapidly increasing.

Educators and students, on the other hand, are deeply concerned about the reopening of classrooms under current conditions. At U-M an open letter and petition penned by instructors expresses the alarm over the inadequacy of the health safety measures and guidelines announced by the university throughout the summer. The letter points to the insufficiency of relying solely on vaccinations to control transmission of the virus, raises concerns over lack of support for remote teaching, and concerns over the high student density of classrooms, dorms and dining halls that will make social distancing impossible.

Through the whole pandemic, the approach of the U-M administration has been to minimize costs and reductions in revenue associated with protecting students, staff and faculty from the virus. The administration has thus downplayed the danger of the pandemic in order to justify filling dorms, dining halls, football stadiums, and classrooms. On Thursday, University President Mark Schlissel told the student newspaper he expected this fall semester to be “much closer to 2019 than it will be to

2020.”

Last fall, the Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO) carried out a nine-day strike with the principal purpose aimed at opposing the university's imposition of unsafe conditions during the pandemic. The strike was isolated and ultimately shut down by the AFT, with which the GEO is affiliated. The central demands of graduate student workers regarding COVID-19 safety measures, including the right to work remotely, were defeated. Soon after the strike ended, the campus saw major outbreaks of COVID-19, which forced the university to move entirely to remote classes.

Throughout the strike, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) chapter at U-M fought to break the isolation of the strike, urging the expansion of the strike to all campus workers as well as school teachers, autoworkers, and other sections of the working class beyond the campus. It is critical that LEO lecturers learn the lessons that struggle. One year on both lecturers, graduate student workers and students find themselves now in even more dangerous conditions. The unions are overseeing the push to reopen schools, in conjunction with both political parties, in the interests of profit over human life.

Since the GEO strike last fall, strikes and walkouts of workers against rotten contracts and deplorable working conditions have increased significantly. For the success of these struggles they must be broadened. This means workers and educators must take the fight into their own hands. Critical initiatives have already begun to with the formation of rank-and-file committees of workers and educators in the US and globally. Some of the most recent examples are the rank-and-file committees established by Volvo workers in Virginia and Dana auto parts workers in multiple states.

U of M instructors should follow these examples and build a rank-and-file committee independent of the AFT. This committee must put forward demands based on what educators want and need, not what the union and management say workers must accept. U of M lecturers should contact the WSWs for information and assistance in conducting this struggle.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)