

# ISU graduate students vote on union-backed contract enforcing poverty wages

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Graduate students employed by Illinois State University as teaching assistants are voting this week on a tentative agreement reached by the University administration and the Graduate Workers Union (GWU), a branch of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 73.

Voting began Tuesday and will close Sunday. The options offered to the membership by the GWU are to accept a proposed agreement or authorize a strike.

Presently, ISU graduate students have no active collective bargaining agreement with the university. Should the contract pass, it will be the first contract for ISU grad students since the SEIU local 73 gained legal recognition from the National Labor Relations Board in 2019.

The contract proposed to the membership by the GWU-SEIU is an absolute sellout. The terms of the contract, which the GWU leadership is instructing its members to vote yes on, will provide a meager increase to the minimum pay to \$1,200 per month, up from \$954 per month.

The contract also includes a minor reduction in mandatory student fees and a 3 percent raise for all those above the minimum pay. With an inflation rate above 5 percent, the supposed increase is, in effect, a pay cut. Importantly, the contract contains a “no-strike” clause that would impose heavy legal penalties on any strike action for the two-year life of the contract.

The GWU-SEIU is working on behalf of the university to suppress graduate students’ demands for an increase in pay to a livable wage and stifle support for a strike. The union desires above all to ram the contract through, regardless of the terms, so the SEIU can begin collecting mandatory dues payments from students’ paychecks.

Per the terms of accepting the SEIU as their

bargaining representatives, GWU members will not pay mandatory dues until a contract has been implemented. If the current agreement goes through, the SEIU will begin deducting dues money from the workers.

Graduate students receiving such a wage will live in poverty. Taking into consideration the average rent in the Bloomington/Normal area, where ISU is located, of \$675 per month, a graduate worker would be left with only \$525 for food and other necessary expenses. A single unexpected cost such as a car repair or a medical bill would be impossible to pay. Grad student pay is so low, that in January ISU was forced to slightly raise their pay, as it had fallen under the state’s \$11-an-hour minimum wage.

In addition to the pitifully small pay increase, the union completely abandoned graduate students’ demands for full access to health care, including vision and dental. The tentative agreement does offer a 10 percent reduction in mandatory student fees; however, this will amount to only a few extra dollars for the year. Nowhere in the contract or the GWU’s demands is the continued spread of the COVID-19 pandemic even mentioned.

Despite an overwhelming 98 percent strike vote last April, the GWU-SEIU have worked at every turn to stop students from walking off the job. Immediately after the strike vote, the union announced that they would not call a strike, and delayed any further action to this fall, giving the university use of graduate workers’ labor during the busy grading season when a strike would have been most effective.

Of major importance is that the ISU GWU called off their strike at a time when graduate students in other areas were also in struggle against their employers. While the GWU was suppressing an ISU strike in April, graduate students at New York University and

Columbia University went on successive strikes. The UAW in New York and the SEIU in Illinois kept the three struggles separate, avoiding the linking up of graduate students nationally. The SEIU has adopted a similar policy toward its health care members, separating their struggles in several states.

This semester, the GWU has followed the SEIU strikebreaking playbook to the letter. Rather than prepare for a strike, the GWU has staged a number of performative actions meant to “pressure” the university administration. This included a hunger strike being carried out by a handful of graduate students.

These actions are not designed to produce better conditions for graduate workers. Just the opposite, they are meant to divert grad students’ attention away from strike action and keep them on the job while the union bureaucracy cuts deals with the university administration.

ISU graduate students only have to look at the recent track record of SEIU Local 73 in other sections of the working class to expose these bankrupt methods. Most recently, in the longest strike in the union’s history, 2,000 Chicago city workers were sold out by Local 73 in an agreement that left workers paying more for health care than before and an 8 percent total raise that will be entirely eaten up by inflation long before the four-year contract ends.

In September 2020, the SEIU shut down a 10-day strike by 4,000 service workers at the University of Illinois-Chicago, who were demanding improved wages and protections against COVID-19. The deal signed by the SEIU only raised wages to the Chicago minimum of \$15 per hour. A month later, the SEIU ended a 12-day strike by nursing home workers demanding raises and more protections in facilities that have been devastated by the pandemic. The agreement guaranteed a minimum pay of just \$11.10 for nursing home workers, with most employees receiving a raise of only \$1 or \$2 per hour.

Leaders in the GWU themselves admit that the settlement is inadequate, but regardless, they are endorsing the bogus agreement. One GWU leader, Steven Lazaroff, told a local news station, “We think this contract has a lot of wins in it. While it’s nowhere near enough, the poverty wages will still continue, but we are going to use this contract as a foundation to keep building.”

Graduate students should reject this betrayal and prepare for a real fight to win all of their demands. To do so requires a political break with the GWU-SEIU and the building of a rank-and-file committee to organize grad students independently of the union bureaucracies who work hand in hand with the employers.

It is essential for graduate students to ask the basic questions and not be sidetracked by the unions who offer nothing. If there is a strike, will the hundreds of millions of dollars in the SEIU strike fund be used to give grad students full strike pay or will they be on their own and starved back to work?

If the union is not capable of offering any support in the time of a strike, and instead uses the prospect of a strike with no resources as a threat against the workers, then what good is the union? At this point these corporatist organizations have entirely ceased to be unions and function as partners to management and the university administrations.

Graduate students are in desperate need of real political solutions to these problems, and they must themselves take up the fight to build rank-and-file committees opposed to both the poverty conditions working for the university and the union’s attempt to impose those conditions permanently through a no-strike contract.

The Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality stand ready to support graduate students who oppose the rotten agreement and have a desire to take up a real fight for better wages and conditions through the formation of independent committees. We urge all such students to contact us today.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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