

Indiana University grad student workers seek union certification

Jessica Goldstein
15 December 2021

The Indiana Graduate Workers Coalition (IGWC) at Indiana University Bloomington (IUB) announced last Friday that it delivered 1,584 signed union cards to the university board of trustees and requested a union election. According to its web site, the IGWC is a “multidisciplinary group of graduate workers fighting for better working conditions for graduate student workers at IUB.” It is affiliated with the United Electrical Workers union (UE).

In a letter, posted on Twitter and addressed to W. Quinn Buckner, chair of the Indiana University Board of Trustees, the IGWC Organizing Committee writes, “It is our intention with this communication to initiate the process of union representation as outlined in HR-12-20 Conditions for Cooperation Between Employee Organizations and the Administration of IU.” According to the IGWC’s tallies, two-thirds of the 2,500 graduate student employees at IUB signed cards expressing support for forming a union. This is more than double the 30 percent threshold required by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to hold a union recognition vote.

Long working hours, low pay, high fees and rising costs of living make daily life a struggle for many university employees. Grad student workers teach 31 percent of undergraduate classes at IUB while making a fraction of the salary of a tenured faculty member. According to the statement on the 2019 College of Arts & Sciences Report on Graduate Student Funding, grad students’ annual pay in the College of Arts and Sciences after fees is \$13,580 on average. This is barely above the Monroe County, Indiana poverty line for a single individual.

According to MIT’s Living Wage Calculator, a living wage for a single adult in Bloomington with no children is \$23,665, and for an adult with one child \$47,470. Many grad student workers are forced to work other jobs and seek other forms of financial assistance.

“After the nearly \$3,000 in fees I pay per year, my salary isn’t enough to pay for my living expenses let alone the supplies I need for my coursework,” said Kathryn Combs, a grad student worker on the Indiana Grad Workers website. “I work three jobs to scrape together enough to pay my bills and my work suffers because I constantly have to prioritize living expenses over supplies.”

Grad student workers are also demanding dental, vision, and mental health benefits. As one grad student worker stated on the website, “I had to lose a tooth because I had to choose between paying the student fees or paying for dental care last year.”

Fees are a nightmare for many grad students, and they are demanding their elimination. IUB’s graduate student fees are among the highest of Big Ten Universities. Domestic students pay on average \$703 per semester in fees while international students pay \$1,060 per semester. The rise in fee rates has outpaced other increases in the cost of living, which are themselves exorbitant.

The Consumer Price Index, a measure of inflation, was up nearly 7 percent year-over-year in November. At the IUB, graduate student workers’ have not had a university-wide wage increase since 2014, meaning they have taken a de facto cut in real income every year for seven years. Rising costs of fuel, food and rent have placed enormous strain on grad student and other low-income workers in the region.

For its part, the university is flush with cash. As of June 30, 2020, the market value of IU’s endowment—based on gifts and returns on investments—totaled \$2.426 billion. This is in the top 5 percent of all US and Canadian colleges and universities in the market value of its endowment, according to the National Association of College and University Business Officers.

The new IUB president Pamela Whitten has a publicly reported base salary of \$650,000. But the position comes with far more perks. Her predecessor, Michael McRobbie, made roughly the same, but after bonuses, pay set asides, housing allowances, use of university issued cars, he pocketed over \$1 million, making him the fifth highest paid public university president five years ago. While the university has put grad students on starvation rations, last month it was revealed that the board of trustees paid McRobbie another \$592,000 in “consulting fees” after his retirement in June 2021.

Several millionaires and wealthy individuals make up the board of trustees at major universities across the US, and IUB is no exception. The chairman of the trustees, Quinn Buckner, is vice president of communications for Pacers Sports and Entertainment, a division of the professional basketball team owned by billionaire Herbert Simon. IUB trustee James T.

Morris is vice chairman of Pacers Sports and Entertainment and CEO of IWC Resources Corporation and Indianapolis Water Company.

The determination of University of Indiana grad student to collectively fight their oppressive conditions is part of the radicalization of young people and the growing militancy of the working class more broadly. The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) and *World Socialist Web Site* express our solidarity with the IUB students and will fight for the broadest support in the working class as they confront the university and the powerful corporate and political interests that stand behind it.

But a desire to fight is not enough. Students must soberly look at the bitter experience other grad students and workers have had with the official trade unions. Far from uniting workers to fight, the UE, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the United Auto Workers (UAW), the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and other unions have been full partners in the corporate-government assault on the living standards of American workers over the last four decades.

The unions have suppressed the opposition of the working class and contained it within the pro-capitalist channels of the Democratic Party and the official system of “labor relations,” which outlaws any significant challenge by workers to management’s dictatorship in the workplace, let alone to the capitalist system. This has come to a head during the pandemic, with the unions blocking every action by workers to protect their lives because this would interfere with corporate profitmaking.

IUB grad student workers must draw the necessary lessons from the graduate student struggles at New York University and Columbia University earlier this year, and other similar struggles over the last decade. In the more recent case of Columbia and NYU, the UAW worked to isolate these struggles one at a time and refused to link student workers with each other and industrial workers across the country, despite sitting on an \$800 million strike fund.

A similar track record marks the UE, which claims on its website to be a “rank-and-file union” under “members control.” Despite this claim, the UE and Westinghouse Air Brake Technologies Corporation (Wabtec) pushed through a wage-cutting contract in 2019 for 1,700 workers at the company’s Erie, Pennsylvania locomotive factory. The deal was reached after the UE isolated the workers during a nine-day strike. The UE has also isolated University of New Mexico grad students who are being stonewalled by administrators after voting to certify the UE.

In its proposals to university officials, the IGWC, no doubt under the influence of UE supervisors, has outlined the most modest set of demands, which pose no threat to the university’s financial interests. Its Fall 2020 proposals include: a minimum salary of \$21,772 or a \$20 per hour minimum for hourly grad

student workers; annual raises of 2 percent per year or indexed to an inflation index; and an end to fees. The proposed minimum salary for a single parent with two children would put the family just a hair above the abysmally low poverty level set by the county.

A successful struggle of graduate student workers must be based on the principle that all workers have the right to a living wage, quality health care, and safe working conditions, regardless of what university officials and the corporate interests they represent claim is affordable. To fight for this, grad students will have to form their own rank-and-file committee to demand substantial raises to protect them against the ravages of inflation, vacation time, fully funded health care benefits, and the immediate transition to remote learning.

The IGWC has also issued toothless demands regarding safety during the COVID-19 pandemic, even as universities like Cornell have been forced to temporarily close due to the spread of the more contagious Omicron variant. The IGWC simply calls for the “right to move classes on-line when the Assistant Instructors and Instructors of Record determine there is a health risk. Enforce safe work standards in labs and classrooms.” This is worse than inadequate.

Monroe County has recorded 279 infections per 100,000 residents in the past week, a case positivity rate of nearly 10 percent, despite large institutions like Indiana University requiring students and staff to be vaccinated. This situation demands the mobilization of university workers and the student body to demand the closure of the university, universal testing, contact tracing, quarantining and resources for online classes until the pandemic is contained.

From the beginning of the pandemic, however, top administrators at universities across the country have been driven not by public health concerns but by financial interests, including the potential loss of tuition and housing fees and the money made from lucrative college sports events.

That is why the issues facing student-workers cannot be resolved on the campuses. There must be a turn to the working class to mobilize the broad masses of working and young people based on the struggle for socialism and the reorganization of society to meet human needs, not private profit.

If you are an IUB grad student interested in fighting for an independent movement of workers contact the IYSSE and *World Socialist Web Site* to get involved.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact