

“We are essentially paying to work”

University of Michigan social work students strike to win pay for internships

Tim Rivers
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Students at the University of Michigan’s School of Social Work(MSW)are walking out of classes today to demand compensation for their internships, which are currently unpaid and required for graduation. There are approximately 700 students in the social work program.

Matt Dargay, one of the organizers of the Payment for Placement movement at the University of Michigan, spoke with Tim Rivers from the World Socialist Web Site about Monday’s demonstration and the demands of the P4P organization.

TR: Matt, first, thank you for speaking with the *World Socialist Web Site*. Could you explain the situation that students of social work confront? What provoked your demonstration?

MD: The situation right now is that social work students must fulfill a field placement, which is basically an internship, as a condition for graduation. The vast majority of social work students work a minimum of 900 hours at our field placement site completely without pay. The majority of us are doing the type of tasks an MSW therapist or case manager or other social worker does.

I’ve talked to a lot of people who have observed that if not for their labor and other students’, that agency would not be able to operate. So, we view it as a fundamental workers’ injustice and a barrier that is keeping low-income people from entering the social work profession.

What we are asking is to be paid for our fieldwork so that my colleagues, students in need, can be made whole economically and so that future generations of social workers can be more diverse economically and socially.

TR: What are the wages of an MSW-level therapist?

MD: Starting wage at the MSW level from the University of Michigan is about 45,000 a year. That is not a lot of money to begin with. Most people can crack the \$60,000 territory by the end of their career, but it is not a lucrative profession.

TR: You have to have a Master’s degree in order to get into MSW level therapy. Is that right?

MD: If you really want to call yourself a therapist, you have to get a Master’s degree. If you want to get hired by any agency in a professional capacity, you have to have a Master’s. We are paying a significant sum to get through this program and we are essentially paying to work. The University of Michigan Master’s program costs \$15,000 a semester for a four-semester program, for a total of \$60,000.

TR: Who are the clients of the agencies?

MD: It’s quite diffuse and complex. Social workers in community-based settings are serving people from working class and poor backgrounds. A lot of us in this program were ourselves once in a place of need or hardship and we were served by a social worker who inspired us to join this field.

TR: Would you say the agencies and the university takes advantage of that commitment?

MD: I would say the university does. I’m a little bit more sympathetic to some of the agencies. This really speaks to the whole society-wide lack of investment in care labor. Since it can’t really be labor that generates a profit, we have decided on a national level not to invest as much into education, preventative public health measures and social work as we really should. There is just not as much funding available for social work agencies as there should be. They end up competing

with each other for measly grants and dollars, and a lot of agencies probably would want to pay their student but simply cannot. It would break the bank if they were to attempt that without any help from an outside source.

That outside source I believe should be the University of Michigan system because the university system on top of being fabulously wealthy also already provides stipends for law students and public policy students who work for public interest firms. These are firms that not unlike social work agencies are operating for the common good or are profit-making and don't have a great revenue stream. We believe that U of M has the capacity and should use its capacity to invest in social work.

TR: Please, explain what you mean by 'fabulously wealthy.'

MD: U of M has an endowment of \$17 billion. It has grown by 40 percent since last fiscal year.

TR: The endowment has grown by 40 percent in a single year...?

MD: Yeah, in fiscal year 2021 it grew by 40 percent. I don't know the entirety of its portfolio. But it invests in the stock market, for instance. And perhaps some of its stocks performed extremely well. That's part of it. Really the pool of money that is called the unrestricted endowment can be spent on literally anything. That is \$5.7 billion.

TR: Were you part of the E-pivot? [The protests by thousands of students and staff in January 2022 against the unsafe resumption of in-person teaching at University of Michigan when Omicron COVID-19 infections at the university hit their highest levels since February 2021].

MD: I signed on to the letter of support for the E-pivot, but I was not one of the organizers behind it.

TR: Now three months later, it's basically back to normal ... masks optional?

MD: More or less, yes. I did not know the word "immunocompromised" prior to the start of the pandemic. The decision to return to normal was made in too premature a fashion. The Omicron variant was described in the popular media as virulent and contagious but relatively harmless. But for someone whose immune system is not as strong as others, that might not be the case.

TR: Now it's BA.2 and it is much more deadly. Not that BA.1 was mild and not deadly. That was a lie.

MD: We still are seeing quadruple digit death totals across the country during the wave of the so-called less harmful variant.

TR: The walkout that is scheduled for Monday... Are all the students going to participate?

MD: We are seeing some great totals right now. In my best estimation, there are about 90 students who have classes at the time, and right now, 70 of them have RSVP'd to walk out. We have a robust figure of students who have committed to this. We are going to have students who are not in class joining us on the U of M Diag for our rally. I think we're going to crack triple digit figures in terms of attendance.

TR: You are building a network across the country...

MD: We have chapters at Wayne State University in Detroit, Hunter College in New York City, which is part of the City University of New York, University of Georgia and San Diego State University. Those all come to mind.

TR: Are they participating in the walkout?

MD: They are not to my knowledge. They will be sharing our information and cheering us on.

TR: You said you identify as part of a rising movement of working class struggle against inequality and mistreatment.

MD: Absolutely we do. We identify as one piece in the puzzle of the struggle against inequality. We have within our ranks passionate people who care a lot about social justice. Ever since Reagan fired PATCO, the union movement has been absolutely decimated by actions at the highest levels of government.



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