

The issues in the Indiana University grad workers strike

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Graduate student workers at Indiana University Bloomington (IUB) struck Wednesday to demand union recognition from the University administration. The Indiana Graduate Workers Coalition (IGWC) recently affiliated with the United Electrical Workers (UE) and has been calling for the university to negotiate a contract for the graduate workers. The administration has responded with open hostility and threats of firings.

A strike authorization vote concluded Monday with nearly 98 percent of graduate students voting “yes” to strike. Support for the unionization effort is high at IUB, with two-thirds of graduate students signing cards last December to form the union. This figure is more than double the National Labor Relations Board’s (NLRB) threshold of 30 percent normally required to trigger a union recognition vote.

Despite the overwhelming support, the university has refused to allow a formal union recognition vote that would give the union the right to negotiate a contract on behalf of the graduate workers. Under current NLRB law public universities can choose to classify graduate employees as “students” rather than “workers” in order to bypass any obligation to recognize a union. Essentially, under current labor laws graduate students at public universities have no right to a union and must appeal to the university to grant legal recognition.

Conditions for graduate workers at IU, like virtually all universities, are abysmal. Pay can vary depending on department, but averages under \$20,000 per year, with many students earning much less. Jared, an IUB Ph.D. student who spoke to the WSWS, said that his pay comes out to around \$16,000 per year, and that many other grad workers are paid even less. Until recently graduate workers in the School of Music received just \$8,000 per year, for example.

“Almost everyone has to work a second job,” Jared said. “You just can’t live on what we are paid. It’s especially difficult for international students who cannot hold any other jobs.” When asked why he will be striking, Jared said that while the only official demand at this point is for union recognition, “Students have been calling for guaranteed cost of living adjustments to keep up with inflation, full health care coverage and guarantees that it will never be stripped away, protections for international students, and the removal of mandatory fees that can cost thousands of dollars.”

Jared continued, “We are confident that we can win. The university has attempted to pit us and undergraduates against one

another, but it failed. We have many undergrads that have pledged to picket with us. We also have support from the faculty, who signed a pledge promising no retaliation against any strikers.”

When asked if he had anything to say to other workers on strike throughout the world he said, “Solidarity to all of them! If they don’t pay you what you deserve, then they don’t deserve you.”

While the graduate workers are paid poverty wages, they take on the work of running the vast majority of classes at IUB. Another graduate worker told the WSWS that by their second year most graduate workers are responsible for being the primary instructor for at least two undergraduate courses while also keeping up with their own degrees.

The IUB administration has taken a hard line against the unionization effort. In a statement sent out to the campus on April 5, Provost Rahul Shrivastav explained that he would not recognize the IGWC-UE, writing, “I do not believe that we need a union to improve graduate education and I will not revisit this decision.” In the email he also threatened to fire striking graduates or to refuse to grant them new appointments next year.

In addition to union recognition, one of the major issues for graduate students at IUB as well as other universities is the removal of predatory mandatory fees each semester. These fees, often hidden until after commitments have been made, can add up to as much as \$3,000 per year, eating away a large percentage of graduate student workers’ already low wages. International students are especially targeted by these fees and charged more per semester than other students.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality stands in solidarity with the striking graduate students and their fight for a livable wage, the elimination of fees, access to health care, and the many other issues involved. We also unequivocally defend the right of graduate students to have their own organizations and fight collectively for better conditions.

There is no doubt immense support among graduate students for a fight that can win better conditions. However, in order for it to be successful, graduate workers must understand the fundamental political issues involved.

The graduate students at IUB are following a wave of strikes at other universities across the country. In recent years there have been strikes at Columbia University in New York, University of Michigan, University of California, Harvard, and many others. Recently the graduate students at the University of Illinois in Chicago also authorized a strike, although a strike date has not yet

been set.

While the recent experience of graduate student strikes has signaled the desire of educators to fight to defend higher education, the struggles themselves have ended in real losses for workers.

Perhaps most significant among these struggles was the Columbia University graduate student struggle, which in total lasted almost 5 years. The long struggle ultimately ended in January of this year, after on and off strikes for almost a year. While the union leadership of the Student Workers of Columbia-United Auto Workers (SWC-UAW) hailed the end of the strike and the passage of a contract as a “historic victory,” the agreement itself did nothing to improve students’ conditions, providing raises so small that they have been totally erased by inflation. Almost none of the original demands of the workers were met. In addition, the union agreed to a no-strike clause for the entire four-year length of the contract leaving students powerless to fight back against future attacks from the university. Moreover, throughout the struggle countless backroom dealings were conducted between the so-called union leadership and the university.

Similar situations have unfolded throughout every single graduate student struggle in the recent period, regardless of which trade union was involved. In fact, this trend can be observed at nearly every major strike of workers in the last 40 years.

Throughout these struggles the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) have sought to warn workers of the real function and character of the trade unions and outline and fight for a viable political perspective for workers.

In every case the official trade union apparatus works to isolate struggles and exhaust workers, forcing them to use what little savings they have to get through the strike while offering little or, usually, no strike pay from the multimillion-dollar union reserves. Once workers are left with little other choice, the unions ram through a sellout agreement favorable to the employer.

Organizations like UE have a decades long history of betrayal after betrayal, and their interests lie in expanding their base of dues payments, not advancing workers’ living conditions. They exist in order to contain working class struggle and channel it back into the safe confines of the two-party capitalist system.

Under the current conditions, this is a tall order! Graduate student struggles are part of an immense rise in working class struggles throughout all sections of the working class globally. As the graduate student strike begins at IU, there are also strikes underway among oil workers in California and the UK, 55,000 Los Angeles County workers, Honduran transport workers, teachers in Sacramento and Minneapolis, as well as the massive protests in Sri Lanka that threaten to bring down the entire government.

These struggles are being fueled by a pandemic that has claimed the lives of more than a million people in the United States so far. It must also be noted that the forced reopening of schools and universities, facilitated by the trade unions at every step, was a major factor in the mass spread of the virus. The ruling class has utilized the pandemic to hand out trillions of dollars to Wall Street, which is being paid through a massive intensification of the exploitation of the working class.

US-NATO war ~~Magnus~~ible, Russia the over threatens a major military conflict that would be left to the youngest generations to fight. The US-NATO proxy war and the economic sanctions against Moscow are also fueling inflation and food and energy shortages around the world.

The ruling class is determined to make the working class pay for the bailouts for the rich and the cost of the war, which they are escalating relentlessly.

Students at IUB should recognize that graduate student struggles are part of this backlash of the working class against the imperialism and capitalist interests of the ruling class. It is critical that graduate students place their fight for better conditions in this broader context.

The graduate workers at Indiana University hold immense power, and the strike will prove that they can bring the university to a standstill without their labor. However, in order to prevent the fight from being co-opted by the union bureaucracies, who will keep workers in the death trap of official trade union politics tied closely to the Democratic Party and the capitalist state, a political perspective is required.

The WSW and IYSSE urge workers to form rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to conduct their struggle on an independent basis. Workers must recognize that their real allies in this fight are workers across all industries, who face the same abysmal conditions. Finally, workers should resolve to base their demands on what the working class needs, not what the capitalist system and its political front men claim they can afford.

The IYSSE and the Socialist Equality Party will do everything in our power to support the strike of Indiana graduate workers and to connect them with other rank and file workers. We encourage all IUB students to get in contact with us, to share your thoughts on the strike, and to join the IYSSE.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact