

University of Illinois Chicago grad student workers strike against poverty wages

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17 April 2022

On Monday, 1,500 graduate student workers at the University of Illinois Chicago (UIC) who are members of the Graduate Employees Organization (GEO) union are set to go on strike to demand a significant increase in wages to protect themselves against raging inflation in the nation's third most populous city. The GEO and UIC are scheduled to resume bargaining on April 19.

The current contract expired August 15, 2021, and bargaining began in April of 2021. After nearly a year of negotiations and three interventions with federal mediators, UIC GEO announced April 1 that 97 percent of members authorized a strike.

UIC is offering insulting wage increases over the next three years, including 8 percent in the first year and 2 percent in each of the following two years of the contract. With an inflation rate of 8.5 percent, the university's "offer" amounts to a demand for a significant cut in real wages for grad students who make a pitiful \$20,615 over two semesters.

GEO officials say the university will not increase its salary offer, which is \$3,000 below what the GEO has asked for and "less than what grad workers at other Chicago schools make."

In addition, UIC refuses to decrease the amount of student fees that GEO members pay. These student fees are ostensibly to pay for services separate from tuition. All UIC students pay \$1,700 in fees per semester, and GEO members are still required by the university to pay about 40 percent of the normal rate per semester. International students must pay an additional sum of \$130 per semester, and only 50 percent of this fee is waived for international students in the GEO. UIC also has refused to reduce the health care premiums that workers pay every semester for enrollment in the UIC Campus Care program. This costs grad workers \$260 per semester.

The GEO has proposed a 15 percent increase in the first year of the contract and 3 percent in each of the following two years. This is also woefully inadequate for workers in a city where the prices for housing, fuel and food are among

the highest in the country.

Instead of demanding the elimination of all student fees for its members, GEO has called for grad student workers to pay a flat rate of \$100 in fees per semester. It is also proposing members using the UIC Campus Care health program pay \$50 per semester instead of fighting for fully funded health care. GEO has called for the elimination of additional fees for international students who make up around half of graduate workforce at UIC and are largely barred from holding second jobs due to visa restrictions.

The GEO's proposal is also not enough to lift graduate workers at UIC out of poverty. The current pay of \$20,615 for 20 hours of work a week for two semesters is less than half the household income of \$51,360 needed to afford a one-bedroom apartment in the city (with an average monthly cost of \$2,088), according to the website Apartment List.

Many graduate students are working significantly more than the 20 hours. Like at every major university in the US, UIC grad students are working full-time jobs by preparing and teaching classes, grading assignments, and holding office hours, many times in addition to their own academic research work.

In a provocative statement on the ongoing negotiations last week, the university's directors of labor and employee relations stated, "Graduate assistants are students first and are subject to the same student fees as all other UIC graduate and undergraduate students." They claimed that the workers' demands for reduced fees was unreasonable and arrogant given that all other students must bear these costs.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) rejects the UIC's efforts to drive a wedge between grad student workers and the student body. Graduate students are first and foremost workers whose labor is exploited by universities who pay them less than half what it would cost for a full-time faculty worker. Graduate workers play a critical role in higher education, carrying out critical education and research work that top university board members extract value from in the form of enrollments, research grants, and other endowments and budget

contributions. Under these conditions it is justifiable to demand not only a reduction but the complete elimination of tuition and student fees from their shoulders.

At the same time, striking grad students should champion the demand for the sharp reduction in tuition and student fees for all UIC students. The vast bulk of students come from working class and lower middle class families and struggle to pay the exorbitant tuition and fees. According to the website College Tuition Compare, tuition and fees for undergrads cost \$14,126 for Illinois residents and \$28,476 for out-of-state students, plus books, supplies and living expenses.

UIC students need a real perspective and leadership to fight. GEO is affiliated to and under the enormous pressure of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and Illinois Federation of Teachers (IFT), which are deeply integrated into the Democratic Party and hostile to the type of struggle that is needed. Over the last two years, the AFT has shut down one struggle by teachers after another against the reckless reopening of the schools in the middle of a pandemic. This includes the left-talking Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), which capitulated to Mayor Lori Lightfoot's demands to reopen the infected schools to send parents back to work.

In 2019, the GEO pushed through a contract that was completely friendly to the demands of university administration and the board. This cannot happen again! The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) calls on grad students to form a rank-and-file strike committee. This committee, controlled democratically by grad students themselves, must set out a full set of demands, including a 40 percent wage increase, full Cost-of-Living Adjustments (COLA) which indexes wages to inflation, fully paid health care benefits and the abolition of all tuition and student fees.

An appeal must be made to all students and faculty members to join the strike to advance the fight for free, high-quality education for all. At the same time, such a fight—which will pit workers into a direct political confrontation with the Democratic Party—cannot be won if it is limited to the campus. The rank-and-file strike committee should issue a call to workers throughout the city—in the public schools, transit, health care, manufacturing, logistics and retail—for joint demonstrations and strikes to fight the ravages of inflation and the austerity demands of the two corporate-backed parties.

UIC grad workers should reject any claims—whether they are made by UIC or the GEO—that there is no money to fully meet their demands and more. UIC's board of trustees is made up of millionaires and billionaires, corporate CEOs, Democratic and Republican operatives and corporate

lawyers who are only committed to defend the financial and political interests of *their* class. Illinois Democratic Governor J.B. Pritzker, himself a billionaire, is an *ex officio* member of the Board of Trustees and a leading figure in shaping university policy.

Both parties have handed billions to real estate developers and giant corporations. This includes aircraft and defense contractor Boeing, which moved its headquarters to Chicago after being given at least \$41 million in tax breaks and other incentives for 20 years. Many other corporations in Illinois have continued to receive greater and greater incentives from the state at the expense of taxpayers, including during the pandemic when the bipartisan CARES Act was passed, largely to the benefit of major corporations.

UIC workers are joining an international struggle against austerity, which is spreading from Sri Lanka, India and Pakistan, to Italy, France and Greece, and Argentina, Peru and other countries. What is emerging is a global struggle of the working class against capitalism and the devastating economic consequences produced by the pandemic and now the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

The fight to defend living standards must be fused with a political struggle against social inequality, the attack on democratic rights, and the Biden administration's reckless military confrontation with Russia, which threatens to erupt into world war. A socialist and revolutionary program calls for the unity of workers of every race and nationality in every country. The IYSSE will provide the political support necessary to grad workers who want to build this leadership and advance a real fighting program. UIC graduate workers who are interested should contact the IYSSE today.



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