

“You can’t live on this wage”: Striking UIC graduate student workers in Chicago speak from the picket line

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Are you a student at UIC? Contact the IYSSE on campus to talk with us about the conditions you face and to discuss getting involved in the fight to unify workers internationally in the struggle for socialism: iysseuic@gmail.com.

Fifteen hundred graduate students at the University of Illinois Chicago (UIC) are entering their third day on strike Wednesday as contract negotiations continue between university administrators and the Graduate Educators Organization (GEO), an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers union (AFT). The strike began on Monday after graduate students voted by an overwhelming 97 percent on April 1 in favor of a walkout.

UIC’s administration has made clear that they intend to maintain poverty-level pay for grad student workers, who teach large numbers of classes and perform many essential functions for the university.

Grad workers currently make as little as \$20,615, far below what is needed to live in Chicago, where the cost of living is rapidly increasing. The university, however, is offering an insulting 12 percent pay raise over three years. With inflation running at 8.5 percent annually, this could amount to a cut in real income of 13 percent or more over the life of the contract.

The GEO has reported that UIC’s lead negotiator made the provocative statement at a recent bargaining situation, “I would never promise you that the university would pay you enough to pay for all your financial needs.”

UIC’s administration—and behind it, the Democratic Party, which has long dominated Chicago politics—is declaring on behalf of the financial aristocracy that there will be no let-up in the extreme conditions of exploitation of university workers, despite the enormous sums reaped by the ruling class during the pandemic.

The claim that there is no money to pay grad workers a living wage, let alone provide free tuition and high-quality education to all students, is an utter fraud. In Illinois alone, the 10 richest individuals—including billionaire Democratic

Governor J.B. Pritzker—have seen their wealth surge \$32.7 billion since the start of the pandemic, an increase of 80 percent in two years. The wealthiest, Citadel hedge fund owner Ken Griffin, saw his fortune more than double, from \$12.1 billion to \$27.2 billion.

Grad workers are determined to win a livable wage, university-paid health care coverage for their family members, and a reduction in onerous student fees, which can eat up entire paychecks.

As Matt, a striking graduate student worker, told the WSWS, “I think grad students deserve a living wage. The university runs because we do. And we should be able to live and pay rent.”

The strike at UIC is itself part of a broader movement of the working class which is developing internationally. From Sri Lanka to Brazil, Indonesia to Peru, to the US and other major capitalist countries, workers are increasingly launching strikes and demonstrates over surging food and fuel prices, the consequence of two years of an unchecked pandemic and the rapidly escalating US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

On Tuesday, members of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at UIC spoke with grad workers on the picket line about the strike and conditions at the university. The WSWS and IYSSE are urging striking grad workers to expand the struggle through the formation of rank-and-file strike committees and to appeal to the entire campus student body and workforce, and workers throughout the region, for a common fight for livable wages and fully funded, free public education.

“You can’t live on this wage”

Graduate students should be able to “raise their kids if they

have them on the university grad worker wage,” Matt insisted.

The high cost of living in Chicago was one of many reasons Matt was on strike. “My rent is \$1,200 dollars, and when you look at what I actually bring home from the university, \$2,650 sounds great. But I’m paying fees, I’m paying my differential for urban planning. I have all of these costs that mean I have to struggle.

“I’ve applied for food stamps,” he added. “The fact is you can’t live on this wage the way I lived on my old salary before.”

Speaking on his increasingly arduous workload, Matt continued, “I work as a counselor for academic services and they used to have six staff members, where now they have three. The rest of the positions have been filled by grad students.

“We’re writing the reports, we’re doing the newsletters. In a lot of cases, my role is collecting the data. Those are things which staff used to do, but now they’re totally dependent on their grad workers.”

“If you want a sustainable university, you have to pay grad students a living wage,” he said. “I think we’re all looking around and thinking if I had one more bill, if I break my leg, will campus care even cover that? If there were an unexpected expense with my car, how would I survive? We’re all thinking we need a little bit more.”

It is increasingly difficult to make ends meet, he said. “Speaking for myself, I need a little bit more of a cushion. To really be able to learn and do my best work, since I’m already spread so thin, I don’t know if I can do that. And when the fees are so high it’s like... am I working or am I paying to be here? It’s confusing.”

Matt also spoke out in support of the Indiana graduate students currently on strike, saying, “I think here at UIC is a good example of what grad students can accomplish if they come together and strike. All solidarity to Bloomington and the grad students out there.”

“I have to save and scrape every penny to be able to live”

Another striking grad student, a doctoral candidate in the department of public health, said, “I work two part-time positions at the school and I have a third part-time position outside of the school just to be able to afford living in Chicago, which is not cheap at all.”

She spoke on the precarious conditions of graduate student worker life. “The instability of not having a steady contract,

as well as low pay, makes it really challenging for graduate students to do their work successfully,” she said. “I don’t get paid over the summer, I don’t get paid over the winter, and I don’t have sustainable income throughout the year. I have to save and scrape every penny to be able to live when I’m not a student. I have a husband so I live in a dual-income household, but even that isn’t enough to live comfortably,” she added.

“Going on strike...is for everybody, for all workers”

Another teacher’s assistant, who requested to be anonymous, spoke to the WSWs on the pickets with her child in her arms. She was a TA in the fall 2021 semester but has since taken a break.

Describing the struggles she faces, she said: “The pay I got I couldn’t even budget with. It definitely wouldn’t have covered anything [my partner and I] needed, as far as housing, medical payments, transportation or anything. It wasn’t even enough to put into our budget. I was working as a full-time graduate worker and it didn’t even pay enough to be able to rely on it.”

Another graduate student in the department of planning, sustainability and project management said that it was hypocritical for UIC to claim that student workers can make more money with more hours.

“If you work more than 30 hours a week, you lose your tuition waiver. And then you’re forced to pay \$10,000 in tuition. So, if you work more, you’re not really getting paid more.”

“Every type of staff here basically has to strike every time they need a contract,” the student added. “The faculty has to strike, the nurses have to strike, the students have to strike. Everybody has to strike to get any kind of reasonable contract. We’re the lowest paid graduate workers in the city. Going on strike right now is not just for you individually. It’s for everybody, for all the workers.”

The WSWs and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality at UIC encourage all students looking to speak out to contact us to have your story published:



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact