

UIC graduate student workers continue strike against poverty wages, as AFT prepares austerity agreement

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Over 1,500 graduate student workers at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) are nearing the end of their first week on strike, determined to overturn the poverty wages and intolerable conditions imposed by the Democratic Party-backed university administration. The grad workers' struggle has won widespread support and sympathy both on the campus and beyond.

The strike at UIC, authorized by an overwhelming 97 percent vote at the beginning of the month, takes place in the midst of a growing rebellion of workers across the world. As the prices for food, gas and basic goods spiral out of control, exacerbated by the US-NATO war drive against Russia, mass demonstrations have erupted recently in Sri Lanka, Iran, Indonesia, Pakistan, Argentina and Honduras.

There is widespread support for the striking grad student workers on the Chicago campus and beyond. One UIC student commented on a Reddit post about the strike, "This is the second worker strike in the two years I've been here, maybe that should say something about how the university treats its employees." Another UIC student noted, "That and also student workers being paid below Chicago minimum [wage]." Yet another added, "UIC grad TAs are true heroes."

A mood of growing frustration is building among university faculty and grad student workers throughout the University of Illinois system, centered on the surging cost of living and eroding incomes. On Wednesday, faculty at the University of Illinois Springfield (UIS) campus also voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike. Faculty at UIS have not received a raise since 2020, with annual raises in that year and previous years of the prior contract only amounting to 1-2 percent.

Negotiations continued Thursday between the UIC Graduate Educators Organization (GEO), an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and administration representatives. On Thursday night, the GEO tweeted, "These sessions are starting to take on a familiar rhythm—UIC kicks it off with a proposal that ignores our chief concerns, we spend a lot of time trying to find creative solutions and put them on the table, then UIC calls it's night [sic]."

The university has taken a hard line, offering a miserly 12

percent raise over three years, with 8 percent in the first year, effectively a paycut with the current 8.5 percent annual inflation rate. While the GEO has demanded a 15 percent increase the first year, they are calling for a 3 percent increase for the subsequent years, meaning the minimum stipend would still hover around \$25,000 at the end of the contract.

In addition to low pay, grad student workers are saddled with student fees and health care costs, which are particularly onerous for those seeking health care coverage for their family members. Many grad workers are forced to take on second or third jobs or apply for food aid in order to survive. A UIC grad student told the WSWS earlier this week: "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."

Neither proposal by the UIC or the GEO would provide grad students with a livable wage. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology's living wage calculator lists \$36,470 as the required annual income before taxes for one adult with no children living in Cook County, where Chicago is located.

According to the GEO, the UIC's lead negotiator provocatively said in a recent bargaining session, "I would never promise you that the university would pay you enough to pay for all your financial needs."

Such a statement is in fact the attitude of the ruling class more broadly, which is venomously hostile towards workers' efforts to break out of ultra-low wages. While billions are easily doled out for war spending by the Biden administration and both parties, the refrain is incessantly made that there is no money for education, health care and social spending. Meanwhile, Illinois' billionaire Democratic Governor J.B. Pritzker, who sits on the University of Illinois board, saw his wealth increase \$200 million alone since the pandemic began.

As contract negotiations continued between the GEO and UIC administration, AFT President Randi Weingarten made an appearance at the pickets Thursday morning.

Weingarten said on Thursday, "Graduate workers, adjuncts, and full-time faculty are the backbone of their universities. We cannot continue to pauperize them as they educate students.

It's time they got the respect and compensation they deserve.”

In fact, the AFT and Weingarten—who has close to half a million in annual compensation (over \$450,000 annually for the past three years)—have worked to isolate and shut down strike after strike of teachers, school workers and other educators across the US, imposing contracts with below-inflation raises and keeping educators impoverished. Every mass teachers strike that has erupted since 2018 has been sold out by the AFT and its affiliates in various states.

Most recently the AFT and the National Educators Association (NEA) shut down strikes in Minneapolis and Sacramento, sanctioning deals which maintain poverty wages, understaffing and dangerous working conditions for educators and school staff as the COVID-19 pandemic continues.

The appearance of Weingarten at UIC must be taken as a serious warning by striking grad workers. She sits on the Democratic National Committee and operates as a de facto member of Biden's cabinet. She and the AFT are undoubtedly in talks with university administrators and top Illinois Democratic officials over how to end the strike as quickly as possible. They will seek to force through a settlement which is entirely on the terms demanded by the Board of Trustees' corporate and financial elite—as was done following the betrayal of the 2019 strike at UIC.

Graduate students at UIC can mount a successful fight, but in order to do so they need a clear strategy to expand and win the strike. They should form rank-and-file strike committees, independent of the AFT, the Democratic Party and their pseudo-left supporters. Such committees must mount crucial demands that correspond to the real needs of grad students, including:

- **An immediate doubling of the minimum pay for grad workers and annual cost-of-living raises pegged to inflation.** In Chicago, where rent averages \$2,000 a month, workers need more than \$36,000 to survive without working multiple jobs. With annual inflation running at 8.5 percent, any raise less than that means an effective wage cut.

- **Elimination of fees and high tuition for both graduate and undergraduate students.** While the university has sought to drive a wedge between grad workers and undergrads, there is no reason either should be burdened with years or decades of student loan debt.

- **Fully paid, high quality health care.** The university is seeking to actually increase out-of-pocket health care costs. Instead, health care must be fully paid for graduate students, their partners and children, so that no one is forced to choose between needed medical care and other basic necessities.

- **Full strike pay to sustain grad workers' struggle.** UIC graduate students should not have to beg on GoFundMe for strike pay. The AFT has over \$155 million in assets, and the Illinois Federation of Teachers (IFT) has over \$27 million, both of which have been built up with workers' dues, including those of UIC grad workers. These resources must be deployed to sustain the walkout, a move which would send a clear signal

to the university that grad workers are determined to wage a serious struggle.

The claims by university administrators and the Democratic Party that there is no money to meet these demands are a complete fraud. In Illinois, the top 10 wealthiest billionaires, including Governor Pritzker, have increased their fortunes by \$32.7 billion in the two years of the pandemic, a staggering rise of 80 percent. Eight of the largest corporations based in the state—including giants such as Walgreens, McDonald's, Caterpillar, John Deere, Abbott Laboratories and Archer Daniels Midlands—have profited enormously since 2020, netting over \$61.4 billion.

Since 2000 in Illinois, higher education funding has fallen over 47 percent when adjusted for inflation, according to estimates by the Center for Tax and Budget Accountability. The precipitous drop in funding is the result of deliberate policies enacted by both big business parties. In Illinois and Chicago, however, responsibility rests squarely with the Democratic Party, a party of Wall Street and war which has long dominated the state and city.

Grad workers' demands can be achieved and their needs met, but this requires a political struggle against the Democrats and a frontal assault on the wealth of the financial elite. The capitalist system extracts wealth from workers and funnels it to the billionaires and the corporations, and towards war. Instead, trillions must be redistributed from the ruling elite and put towards public education and meeting the social needs of the entire working class.

The strike at UIC cannot be won on the campus alone. Grad workers must broaden their struggle and appeal to faculty, students and UIC workers to mount a campus-wide sympathy strike to shut the campus down. An urgent call should be made to Chicago teachers, nurses, Amazon workers, autoworkers and other sections of the working class for the widest support and a common struggle for higher wages and decent working conditions.

Contact the WSWS today for assistance in carrying out this initiative.



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