GEO shuts down University of Illinois Chicago grad workers strike, seeking to push through sellout agreement

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Early Tuesday morning, the Graduate Employees Organization (GEO) union at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) announced that it had reached a tentative agreement with university administrators and was shutting down the strike by over 1,500 graduate student workers.

Announcing the deal to end the strike in a tweet shortly after midnight, GEO—an affiliate of the national American Federation of Teachers—stated that grad workers had "won," pointing to a minimum pay of over $24,000 by the end of the contract. According to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's living wage calculator, it currently takes over $36,470 in income before taxes for an adult with no children to live in Chicago.

GEO has not yet said when a vote will take place, writing, "More details to come soon, but for now, it's time to get back to work!"

Such a deal must be called what it is: a complete capitulation to the demands of the university and the Democratic Party to maintain the ultra-low wages and high levels of exploitation for grad workers, and a betrayal of their demands for a living wage.

As miserably low as the pay rate is in nominal terms, it will actually entail a cut in real income with annual inflation of 8.5 percent taken into account. With grad workers currently earning a minimum of $20,615, the pay proposed by UIC and the GEO would amount to a roughly 20 percent raise over the life of the four-year contract. If inflation remains at its current level, grad workers would see an approximate fall of 14 percent in their real income by the end of the contract.

The contract, no doubt agreed to by GEO under significant pressure from the AFT, would mean economic devastation for grad student workers. Some will simply be forced out of their education, with others compelled to take on even more outside work and cut back on essentials in the scramble to survive.

There is absolutely no reason for grad workers to accept worsening conditions while Illinois' billionaires and corporations are doing better than ever. With finals approaching and the strike winning growing support among workers and undergrads, the unions are seeking to sabotage the struggle right at the point where grad workers' leverage is increasing.

The WSWS and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality at UIC call for grad workers to organize now to defeat the sellout contract! Grad workers should organize emergency online meetings to discuss their response, formulate demands based on what they actually need—including a doubling of the minimum pay to meet the cost of living in Chicago—and make preparations to resume the strike as soon as possible.

GEO and the AFT have once again shown they are incapable of securing the needs of their members. New organizations are needed, rank-and-file committees, which are democratically controlled by grad workers and which take as their starting point what they need to live, not what the university administration and its board of trustees claim is affordable.

The GEO has sought to redirect striking graduate students' attention to fruitless appeals to the Democratic Party, which the AFT is deeply integrated into. It issued an open letter to billionaire Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker Sunday, which stated: "We are growing increasingly concerned that the intransigence and recklessness of the university administration will do serious long-term damage to our students' learning conditions and to the university's reputation. As a champion for workers' rights and higher education, and as the chief executive of the state, we implore you to take action to ensure that UIC becomes a more attractive institution to work and pursue an education."

To present the billionaire Pritzker—scion of the family which has accrued its fortune through the extreme exploitation of Hyatt hotel workers—as a "champion of workers' rights and higher education" is nothing short of ludicrous, and an attempt to sow illusions in the Democratic Party, a party of Wall Street, inequality and war.

As the WSWS wrote Monday, GEO had been signaling that it was close to reaching a concessions agreement to end the strike. The union wrote "We have never been on strike for the sake of being on strike. It has always been to get a fair contract, and we tried hard to reach an agreement. … We believe we are close to settling this contract." In addition to low wages, the GEO bargaining update went on to suggest it was conceding on health care and fees.

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The GEO added that, for health care and fees, that UIC would only cover 25 percent of health care costs for dependents of graduate workers. Graduate students will also have to pay $260 per semester in health care costs for the first year, according to UIC's proposal, and over $285 in the following year.

On fees, the GEO added, "in a show of good faith, *we took them at their word* and stepped down to an international fee of $65 and removed reference to tuition differentials" (emphasis added). But there is no reason that graduate workers should take the university at its word.

For its part, the UIC administration has brazenly maintained that there is no money to provide a substantial raise for graduate workers. According to the GEO, the UIC lead negotiator provocatively warned the striking students, "I would never promise you that the university would pay you enough to pay for all your financial needs."

Graduate students spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* last week about working two to three jobs just to make ends meet, while others struggled with the high cost of housing and rent in Chicago.

Another UIC graduate student described their conditions on Reddit in response to the WSWS report, clarifying the impoverished conditions Teachers Assistants (TA) and Research Assistants (RA) face. "Raises help out students who do not qualify for the (albeit meager) benefits provided by TA and RA positions. Graduate hourly positions do not allow you to work full time, thus preventing you from receiving any full-time benefits.

"Additionally, although PhD students make up a large portion of the graduate students at UIC, there are people like me in non-PhD programs who do not receive funding for tuition.

"I recognize that $26 is a great hourly rate, but TAs are technically salaried part-time workers. When I worked as a TA, I was given a 0.375 position (equal to a 15-hour workweek) and regularly exceeded that, as I worked hours beyond this to help my students out in a 6 credit hour course. We don't get overtime and we didn't qualify for benefits.

"Almost every non-PhD student I know has at least two jobs, if not more unpaid work, given the research requirements for my particular degree."

The claim that there is no money for funding education and increasing the salaries of graduate workers is a fraud. Corporations are making record profits, and eight of the largest corporations in Illinois alone—including Walgreens, McDonalds, Caterpillar, John Deere and others—have made over $61.4 billion in profits since 2020. At the same time, while the profits of the corporations have remained untouched, Illinois has cut funding for education by over 47 percent since 2000 when adjusted for inflation, according to the Center for Tax and Budget Accountability.

Throughout the strike, the AFT isolated the striking graduate student workers, who had to beg on GoFundMe for strike pay, despite the fact that the union controls over $155 million in assets. The AFT has sold out every major teachers strike since 2018. It did nothing to mobilize the UIC faculty on campus or the Chicago teachers behind the graduate workers.

Graduate workers confront not just the treachery of the AFT, which prevented a wider struggle of educators from growing. They are engaged in a struggle against the Democratic Party and the corporate and financial elite that run the UIC Board of Trustees, which oversaw the imposition of poverty wages on striking UIC workers with the help of the SEIU in 2020. The UIC Board includes the billionaire Governor Pritzker, who saw his fortunes rise by $200 million since the pandemic began.

To meet their needs, UIC graduate student workers should demand a doubling of the minimum pay, with annual cost-of-living expenses pegged to inflation. Health care should be fully funded for graduate students and their dependents, and all fees should be eliminated with a significant reduction in tuition costs for UIC graduate students and undergraduates.

The struggle of the graduate students against unlivable wages, inflation and exploitation by the administration is not a mere run-of-the-mill contract struggle. It is part of a global wave of opposition against impossible social conditions, including the skyrocketing prices of food, gasoline, housing and necessities, triggered by the pandemic and the deadly US-NATO war drive against Russia. This means that UIC grad students have powerful allies all over the world.

To turn outward for support and to break the attempts to shut down the strike means taking the conduct of the strike out of the hands of the AFT and the workers themselves forming an independent rank-and-file strike committee. This committee would mobilize UIC workers, undergraduates and faculty to shut down the campus and appeal to Chicago teachers, autoworkers, logistics workers and others to support their struggle and make it the tip of the spear of a broader counteroffensive for better wages and working conditions.

Contact the WSWS today to learn more about forming a rank-and-file strike committee among UIC graduate workers.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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