

UIC graduate students: Vote no on the GEO-AFT sellout tentative agreement! Form rank-and-file committees to expand the struggle for a living wage!

International Youth and Students for Social Equality at UIC
27 April 2022

In the early hours of Tuesday morning, the Graduate Educators Organization (GEO) announced that it had reached a tentative agreement with the University of Illinois Chicago (UIC) and was shutting down the strike by over 1,500 graduate student workers, ordering its members back to work later that day.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at UIC stands in complete solidarity with the fight of graduate students for a living wage, a sharp reduction in exorbitant fees and tuition, fully paid healthcare coverage, and more. Any sober reading of the contract summary, however, leads to the unavoidable conclusions that: 1) it would result in increasing economic devastation for grad student workers, and 2) it is a major betrayal of grad students by the GEO and its parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).

The GEO is attempting to sell the agreement as a “victory,” tweeting Tuesday, “Strike suspended—we won.” In reality, the deal will only provide graduate students with a minimum pay of \$24,200 per year by the end of the contract in 2025, far below what MIT *currently* estimates is needed to live in Chicago. At the same time, the deal would raise healthcare costs and largely leave in place exorbitant student fees.

University officials have lauded the agreement. Chancellor Michael D. Amiridis and Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs Javier Reyes wrote that it “ultimately addresses the needs of our graduate workers while balancing the best interests of our entire campus community” and is “a collective bargaining agreement that is fair and beneficial for all involved.”

When the university PR reps write about the “the entire campus community” and “all involved,” they are not referring to UIC’s student body, its faculty, or the broader workforce that keeps the school running. What they really mean is that the agreement is in the “best interests” of the corporate and financial interests who oversee UIC, dominate U of I’s board of trustees, and are represented by the Democratic Party, which, along with the Republicans, are everywhere attacking public education and demanding that workers accept austerity.

Should graduate students accept this contract, it would mean that many would either be simply driven out of their education, forced to take on even larger student loans, or compelled to take even more outside work in the struggle to survive. The real and devastating impact of the agreement would be felt for years to come.

The IYSSE chapter at UIC and its parent organization, the Socialist Equality Party, call for graduate workers to vote “No” on the contract and reject the entire framework of low wages being foisted on them.

To make a breakthrough, grad workers must take the struggle into their own hands. Grad workers should organize emergency online meetings, independently of the GEO and AFT, to democratically formulate demands based on what grads and other students actually need, not what the university’s highly paid administrators claim is affordable. Committees of rank-and-file grad workers should be initiated to prepare a renewal of strike action, its expansion throughout the entire campus and university system, and the mobilization of support in the working class in Chicago and beyond.

What the “highlights” show

As has become the standard operating procedure of the pro-corporate trade unions, graduate students were ordered back to work without even knowing the exact terms of the agreement. The GEO has since only published a cherry-picked list of “highlights” of the proposed contract on their website.

Even the limited details GEO has released, however, show that the deal fails to address the essential needs of grad workers:

- For the 2022-2023 academic year, the minimum pay for a graduate worker was increased by 9.58 percent to \$22,590, up from the current minimum of \$20,615. For the next two academic years, graduate students would see pay increases of just 3.76 percent and 3.25 percent respectively. When inflation is taken into account, the contract will ultimately result in a loss in real wages. **If the current inflation rate of 8.5 percent continues during the life of the contract, grad workers would see a decline in real income by nearly 9 percent.**

Notably, the agreement does not include an increase to base pay for the 2021-22 school year, with students receiving only lump sum payments for the semesters they worked. The retroactive pay, a significant share of which will likely be eaten up by taxes, is designed to lure desperately cash-strapped students into approving the deal.

- Healthcare costs would increase over the life of the contract, from

\$260 to \$280. While the deal would increase the portion the university pays towards insuring dependents to 25 percent, grad workers raising families would continue to be saddled with thousands of dollars a year in health insurance costs. For the spring semester 2022 alone, UIC charges \$1,855 to cover a spouse under CampusCare, and \$936 for children.

- The contract would largely leave in place the extortionate fees grad students are subjected to, which can eat up entire paychecks. The contract summary lists a “\$65 waiver and freeze of the international fee in the body of the contract” and claims that there will be a \$300 reduction in the general fee that all students must pay each semester. However, nothing would prohibit the university from unilaterally raising fees repeatedly over the life of the contract, with UIC aggregating to itself the right to change fees “without notice any time prior to the first day of instruction.”

After the strike was called off and the deal announced, many UIC students took to social media to express their frustration with the agreement on Reddit. One UIC graduate student wrote on Reddit that they were “not particularly pleased with how negotiations ended up going; I think we could do a lot better,” adding, “The agreement still needs to be ratified by the union [membership] and I’ll be voting against ratification. For any UIC grad students seeing this, I hope you do the same.”

Another student commented, “Our school has plenty of cash. They’re just another state sponsored for-profit corporation that pays their workers (Profs and TAs) like dirt and their upper management and C-class like kings.”

The political and class interests behind the demands for poverty wages

UIC and the broader University of Illinois system are run by lavishly paid executives and directors, such as Donald J. Edwards, the chairmen of the board of trustees and former CEO of Flexpoint Ford, a \$5 billion private equity firm; UIC Chancellor Michael Amiridis, who received \$570,000 in compensation from the university in 2021; and Timothy L. Killeen, the president of the U of I system, paid a base salary of nearly \$800,000 per year.

These sums, however, are dwarfed by the vast amounts of wealth monopolized by Illinois’ billionaires and corporations. The top 10 richest people in Illinois—including Democratic Governor J.B. Pritzker, who sits on the U of I board and appoints its members—collectively control over \$73 billion dollars, according to *Forbes*, and increased their wealth by \$32 billion.

Illinois-based corporations have reaped gigantic profits over the course of the pandemic, with the eight largest netting over \$61.4 billion. Just yesterday, ADM reported that its first quarter earnings jumped 53 percent, to \$1.05 billion, driven by the sharp run-up in grain prices from the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

Clearly, the attempts by UIC and the Democratic Party to claim that there is no money to provide graduate students with a living wage *and* vastly reduce the cost of higher education is a lie. There are massive sums of money in society being hoarded by the capitalist class, while workers are squeezed for every penny by the rising price of food, housing, gas, and nearly all other expenses.

Vote no! Expand the fight throughout the university and to the working class in Chicago and beyond!

It is not a matter of the contract merely being inadequate; rather, it is a complete capitulation by the GEO, under pressure from the AFT, to the demands of university administrators, the Democratic Party, and their backers in the financial elite to maintain the ultra-low wages and high levels of exploitation of grad workers.

There is no legitimate reason for graduate students to accept three more years of increasing poverty. The strike has already made clear that there is immense support among UIC students, graduates and undergraduates alike, to fight back against these abysmal conditions.

The IYSSE urges graduate students to reject the tentative agreement, and to organize meetings independently of the GEO to draw up demands corresponding to what grad workers and other students need, such as:

- **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, an individual adult currently requires an annual income of \$36,000 to pay for necessities, according to MIT.

- **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.** 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 strengthen the 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.

The IYSSE is confident in the ability for UIC’s graduate workers to win this fight. Grad workers hold an immense amount of power, performing labor which is indispensable for the functioning of the university.

The strike at UIC is itself part of a developing movement in the working class internationally. Facing rising and unbearable living expenses, driven by the pandemic and the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, workers throughout the world are increasingly entering into struggle.

For grad workers at UIC to secure their needs, it is to this force they must turn: the working class, the great revolutionary force in society. The IYSSE will provide grad students every assistance possible in organizing this struggle. We urge to join this fight and contact us today at: iysseuic@gmail.com.



To contact the WWSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wws.org/contact