

The sellout of the UIC graduate student strike: The political lessons

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The strike of over 1,500 graduate student workers fighting against poverty wages imposed by the Democratic Party-backed University of Illinois Chicago (UIC) administration was shut down and sold out last month, following the intervention of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).

Despite the Graduate Educators Organization (the GEO is an AFT affiliate) proclaiming a “victory” and suspending the strike on April 27, the striking students were presented with a contract that maintained unlivable poverty wages for the duration of the 2022-2025 period.

On April 29, the GEO tweeted, “The GEO membership has decisively ratified our next contract! The strike is no longer suspended—it’s now ended! We look forward to implementing this contract.” No details were provided of the exact vote count or how many graduate students voted.

What’s clear is that this is a contract that will keep grad students in conditions of economic desperation. The \$24,200 total annual income accepted by the GEO for the final year of the contract, which includes a no-strike clause, will push grad students into extreme levels of poverty and financial hardship, with inflation already at 8.5 percent currently. This is the second UIC grad student strike in the past few years, and resulted in yet another sellout agreement that keeps graduate students poor and exploited.

Even before the contract vote last month there was a determination among graduate students and undergraduate student supporters that they had to fight for a significantly higher living wage to survive. One graduate worker pointed to the levels of hardship they face currently: “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.”

A sellout contract

The full details of the contract point to why a new political strategy is needed for graduate students and educators, at UIC and other universities. The GEO, under pressure from the AFT,

imposed a sellout contract and isolated the strike of the graduate students. The following are some key details:

Wages: UIC students will receive \$22,590 in the first year of the contract, \$23,440 in the second year and \$24,200 in the final year of the contract. With inflation at 8.5 percent and rising, in real terms these wages will amount to a massive pay cut just this year alone.

None of these wages will meet the central demand of students for a livable wage in Chicago, with a continuously rising cost of living. According to MIT’s living wage calculator, an adequate livable wage currently requires more than \$36,000 a year for an adult without children to survive in Cook County, where Chicago is located. The average rent for a 1-bedroom apartment in Chicago is over \$2,155. Gas prices in Chicago are currently at \$5 a gallon.

Graduate students deserve significantly more than what the university claims it can “afford,” while the top UIC administration personnel are paid hundreds of thousands a year annually and the UIC Board of Trustees is run by billionaires and millionaires, including the billionaire Illinois Democratic Governor J.B. Pritzker.

Health care: Students will have to pay \$260 for health insurance each semester the first year of the contract, \$270 a semester the second year of the contract and \$280 per semester in the final year. Moreover, the plans will only cover a pitiful 25 percent of healthcare costs for grad workers’ dependents, including spouses and children. But what students need is fully paid healthcare, including for dependents, in the midst of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Fees: The GEO accepted a number of fees in the contract that will eat into the paychecks of students’ wages. Some examples include: parking fees that can increase every year by 4 percent, a “General Fee” of \$25 per semester, etc. All such fees must be eliminated and the high cost of tuition for both graduate and undergraduate students be brought down drastically.

Strikes: Most egregiously, the GEO accepted a no-strike clause that will force graduate students to work under the terms of this sellout contract even as living costs spiral out of control: “There shall be no strike during the term of this Agreement. Neither the Union, through its officials, nor any assistant covered by this Agreement shall cause, instigate, participate in

support, encourage, or condone any strike, slowdown, or sympathy strike.”

The way forward

At the same time, the determination of graduate students to strike at UIC was not a mere contract battle. It was part of a growing wave of working class struggles across the world against intolerable living conditions and skyrocketing prices of food and gas, in part due to the US-NATO war drive in Ukraine against Russia. Mass demonstrations have engulfed the developing world, including in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, India, Peru and a number of other countries.

Students at Indiana University are also currently on their fifth week on strike, determined to fight against similar conditions faced by the graduate students at UIC and across the country. In recent years graduate students across the US have boldly taken strike action to demand an end to their indentured servitude at America’s colleges and universities. These struggles included strikes at Columbia University in New York, the University of Michigan, the University of California, and many others.

The militant mood among graduate students is part of a leftward movement of young people who are increasingly hostile to the capitalist system. These strikes express the desire of this massively exploited layer of workers to fight back against impossible living conditions.

Such developments point to the enormous potential for a wider mobilization of the working class to link up and fight for a significantly higher standard of living and against the bipartisan attacks on public education that have continued for more than two decades.

However, graduate students, like all workers, have to be able to tell their friends from their enemies. Organizations like the GEO and the AFT and others like the United Auto Workers and the United Electrical Workers that call themselves “unions” actively work to strangle workers’ struggles.

Throughout the UIC graduate student strike, the AFT and the Illinois Federation of Teachers (IFT) prevented the UIC faculty from carrying out sympathy strikes with the graduate students. And the SEIU and other unions kept the UIC workers and health care staff (who previously struck in 2020) on the job. No effort was made to unite the faculty, workers and students across UIC and beyond to shut the campus down. Faculty continued to teach, effectively forced by the faculty union and the AFT to cross the picket line both in-person and online.

UIC grad students also had to beg on GoFundMe for strike pay, even as the AFT and IFT control millions in assets and financial resources, including paying AFT President Randi Weingarten close to half a million in income every year.

Grad students, undergraduates and workers need to draw the

political lessons of the strike and break out of the straitjacket of the so-called “unions,” which enforce the exploitation of grad students and subordinate them to the interests of the corporate and financial elite and the Democratic Party.

The UIC administration, asserting the policies of the Democratic Party, made provocative statements during the strike that they would not provide students with a livable wage. This is in line with the bipartisan attacks on public and higher education over the last two decades, while corporate profits and the wealth of Illinois’ billionaires remain untouched. In the last two years of the pandemic, universities have cut more than 650,000 jobs.

The claim that there’s no money for education is yet another lie. Trillions have been given to Wall Street during the pandemic and over the last four decades, while funding for education has been decimated. And trillions more have been handed to the US military to carry out wars of plunder that increasingly threaten planetary suicide, most recently the reckless provocations by the US and NATO in Ukraine against Russia.

Meanwhile, funding for higher education across the US was \$6.6 billion less in 2018 than in 2008, when adjusted for inflation, according to a study by the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities.

Graduate students at UIC, Indiana and across the country must counter the lie that there’s no money and fight to mobilize society’s resources to meet social needs, including public education. Education is a social right that can only be fought for in a fight against the capitalist system, which enriches a tiny social layer at the expense of the vast majority of workers. However, new organizations, independent of the unions and the Democratic Party, must be built to wage such a struggle.

Independent rank-and-file committees of graduate students must be built at UIC and beyond that will fight for graduate workers’ interests and link up with undergraduate students, faculty and workers and appeal to Chicago teachers and industrial workers in a joint political struggle against the intolerable conditions of life facing millions under capitalism today. Such a struggle requires a socialist strategy to win.

Contact the WSWS today to discuss a socialist strategy for graduate student. Help build the chapter of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality at UIC and on other campuses.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact