

Indiana University Bloomington grad student workers vote to suspend their strike until the fall semester

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More than 1,000 graduate assistants at Indiana University Bloomington (IUB) have voted to suspend their four-week strike for the summer and resume the struggle against the university administration at the beginning of the Fall 2022 semester.

A tweet on Tuesday from the Indiana Grad Workers Coalition-UE (IGWC-UE) said that members “have voted to suspend our strike until Sept 26th.” The tweet also said that the coalition will be moving forward over the summer with plans to establish a local of the United Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers of America (UE) at IUB and to “strategize for an even larger strike Fall 2022.”

The graduate students launched their strike action on April 13 to demand that the university recognize their union and negotiate an employment agreement with the academic workers who are paid poverty wages, with many of them earning less than \$20,000 per year and some making as little as \$8,000. The university administration responded to the strike by refusing to recognize the IGWC-UE and maintaining the designation of graduate workers as “students” who have no legal standing to organize a union under rules set by the National Labor Relations Board.

The university has also responded to the strike, which has widespread support from the IUB student body and faculty, with hostility and threatened to terminate the employment of graduate student workers who joined the strike. The IUB Provost Rahul Shrivastav has repeatedly stated the university will never recognize a graduate assistant union. More than two-thirds of the graduate students have signed up to unionize, and the entire staff voted 98 percent to go on strike.

The IGWC-UE bargaining committee also published

the full text on Twitter of a statement on its decision to suspend the strike. The statement says the strike will resume in the fall “after another vote of union members.”

The two reasons for suspending the strike are stated as wanting to see the “effects of the strike and of the Special Meeting of Bloomington Faculty on the Administration and the Board of Trustees” and that the continuation of the strike needs to be “under conditions we choose and under conditions in which we are strong.”

The bargaining committee then said that the graduate student workers “are strongest when we are teaching hundreds of classes in the fall and spring semesters.”

The special faculty meeting referenced in the statement took place on Monday, and more than 732 professors attended the discussion of the strike, the first meeting of its kind since 2005. The faculty members in attendance voted on a series of resolutions regarding their relationship to the graduate student instructors and their strike.

The first resolution that passed reasserted the shared governance of the faculty over the graduate student workers and emphasizing that academic departments and professors control the appointments, not the university administration. A second resolution that passed called on the administration to “meaningfully engage” with the grad students union.

Another resolution calling for cooperation among all parties involved in the dispute and emphasizing the obligation of professors to teach and submit grades was decisively defeated. Since the meeting did not have the requisite quorum of 800 faculty members, the resolutions will be submitted to the entire faculty for

ratification.

The balance of the statement from the IGWC-UE bargaining committee said that part of the preparations for the resumption of the strike in the fall is “to ask graduate instructors to move their classes off of Canvas for fall 2022” and to “explore how research assistants could join instructors in the strike.” Canvas is the web-based learning management system used at IUB.

The bargaining committee also expressed “hope” that the IUB administration “will talk with IGWC-UE” and that “pressure from our strike and from the Special Faculty Meeting will lead the Board of Trustees to provide a pathway to unionization.” The bargaining committee also wrote, “We hope that removing ourselves from Canvas and preparing RAs will further strengthen a prospective strike and bring the Administration to their senses.”

The situation at IUB remains tense, and the confrontation between the grad workers and the administration is far from resolved. As one TA told *Inside Higher Ed*, the support from the faculty was the result of the intransigence of the administration, “instead of offering a pathway for discussion and dialogue about union recognition, about graduate employee concerns, the response has been threats, attempts to intimidate and attempts to punish graduate employees by denying them their rights to teach.”

As we pointed out in our previous report on the IUB strike, while tactics aimed at winning support from students and other staff on campus are important, the key element required to take forward the fight for the right to organize and win a livable wage by graduate student workers is to learn from the lessons of previous campus strikes. In particular, this means understanding the treacherous role played by the official labor unions in isolating and betraying these struggles.

At the University of Illinois Chicago (UIC), for example, a strike by over 1,500 graduate student assistants in the Graduate Educators Organization (GEO), an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), was shut down and sold out on April 27 while the leadership declared the contract a “victory.”

Once the strike was “suspended,” the AFT-led GEO declared the strike over and presented a contract that froze total annual income from 2022-2025 at \$24,200 and included a “no-strike” clause. This is the second

time the grad student assistants were sold out at UIC by the AFT/GEO in recent years, the first time being in April 2019.

The track record of the UE is no different. Although the UE is not affiliated with the national AFL-CIO union apparatus in Washington D.C. and presents itself as a “rank-and-file union,” it has isolated and betrayed the recent strike of grad students at the University New Mexico and, in 2019, pushed through a wage reduction agreement for 1,700 workers at Westinghouse Air Brake Technologies Corporation.

The struggle of graduate assistants at IUB is part of a growing wave of working class strikes, protests and political actions across the US and internationally against intolerable working conditions, inadequate wages and benefits, as well as government repression and attacks on democratic rights. Grad students must turn to the enormous power of the working class and fight to mobilize all its sections, as well as students, against the entire profit system that is at the root of their exploitation by institutions of higher education.

Nothing can be won by hoping that the university administration will “come to its senses.” The starting point for IUB grad students is to break free from the influence of the official labor unions, such as UE, and organize a rank-and-file committee that will fight for a political strategy that is based not on support for the Democratic Party but on the mobilization of the working class and the fight for socialism.



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