

Temple University graduate students begin open-ended strike for higher pay, better health care

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On Tuesday morning, 750 Temple University graduate student teaching and research assistants went on an indefinite strike against the campus administration's refusal to meet their demands.

The graduate students are members of the Temple University Graduate Students Association (TUGSA) Local 6290. They are demanding higher pay, better work conditions, health care coverage for dependents and paid parental leave time. The average pay for teaching assistants and research assistants at Temple is miserable, at only \$19,500 a year.

Grad students are demanding a 50 percent pay increase, which would bring the base pay rate to \$32,800; Temple is only offering a 3 percent raise, which would bring the average pay to \$22,500 by 2026. According to a 2021 article on its recruitment website Zippia, in the city of Philadelphia where Temple is located, a "good" salary is considered "anything over \$47,000."

This is the first time that TUGSA Local 6290 has gone on strike in its 20-year existence. Contract negotiations between the students and school have been going on for over a year, and graduate students voted in November to go on strike with 99 percent in favor.

Temple University published a statement to the campus community, declaring "our priority is the quality and continuity of your classes during this time." The university has threatened students participating in the strike, writing on its official web page that strike participants will not be paid, lose tuition subsidies and not receive healthcare coverage.

According to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, "Temple University has recommended international students consult with an immigration lawyer for any potential

impact on their visas before making a decision to strike."

The university has sought to present the student workers as greedy. "TUGSA continues to demand 50% pay increases, increases in free health coverage and other benefits not available to even full-time employees," the campus stated in a public comment, adding that it has made "reasonable proposals for pay increases and benefits coverage." However, in addition to the low pay, the union says that a family plan, which the university does not provide, can cost more than 80 percent of a graduate student's pay. International students are required to have health care coverage for themselves and their family to stay in the country.

Temple has sought to justify its low pay and benefits to its workers by claiming poverty. "Each university, like every employer, has different levels of resources and considerations when making decisions on major cost items like compensation." This is false. Temple has an endowment of nearly \$875 million and reported \$165 million revenue in 2021. School President Jason Wingard, a former Goldman Sachs executive, alone makes \$1 million a year, and individuals on his management team earn six-figure salaries.

The strike at Temple University comes amid an upsurge of workers' struggles in the United States and internationally. The fight has been supercharged by the capitalist class's efforts to impose the cost-of-living crisis and other aspects of its failed pandemic policies onto the backs of working people.

Graduate students, who form a superexploited layer of workers on all university campuses, have emerged as a center of strike activity. Last November, 48,000 University of California's graduate students began the

largest university workers' strike in American history. At least 1,600 part-time faculty at The New School in New York City struck also in November. In January, the University of Illinois-Chicago's faculty and staff of 1,500 went on strike and are currently voting on the school's proposal. Johns Hopkins University graduate students have voted 2,053 to 67 to form a union, joining a wave of unionization among graduate students across the country.

Internationally, 850 faculty and staff walked off their jobs at Newfoundland University in Canada on Monday, January 30. Over 3 million people marched in France on Tuesday against pension cuts proposed by President Emmanuel Macron. In Britain, half a million are marching against laws that would illegalize their right to strike. Also in Britain, around 115,000 postal workers are voting for strike action in their continuing dispute with Royal Mail.

While graduate students are justified in fighting for better living standards, TUGSA has limited the issues of the strike to a "lack of respect and [Temple's] failure to seriously bargain." These vague grievances mean that the strike can be ended at any time so long as the university agrees to show "respect" in negotiations even if none of the demands are met. Even if TUGSA's demands were met without resistance from university negotiators, the graduate students would get a salary of \$32,800 a year, which is still below the living wage for the city of Philadelphia.

TUGSA is an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). On Friday, AFT President Randi Weingarten addressed the striking students of Temple University, giving empty rhetorical comments about the university failing to "walk the walk" and treat its workers with respect.

Weingarten's empty posturing is meant to evade the role that she and the AFT have played prior to the pandemic, when she traversed the United States shutting down and selling out educators' strikes which threatened to escape the narrow confines of the union in states such as West Virginia, Arizona, Oklahoma and elsewhere.

During the pandemic, Weingarten worked hand in hand with the Biden administration to reopen major school systems, which had gone to remote learning at the insistence of worried educators. In doing so, she lied to educators and promoted every false narrative

about the pandemic, including the long-disproven claim that COVID-19 does not spread in schools. This was done at the behest of Wall Street, which required that school-aged students be in their classes so that their parents could return to work to produce profits.

Weingarten's deceptions reached new levels of criminality in late 2021. She hosted several online panels with Open Schools USA, an organization promoting the right-wing "herd immunity" concept. Members of that panel, such as Dr. Jay Bhattacharya and Dr. Tracy Høeg, have most recently been featured guests of Florida's fascistic Republican Governor Ron DeSantis, who has invited speakers to rail against vaccinations and public health more generally.

In Philadelphia, the AFT affiliate Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) railroaded public school teachers into unsafe classrooms during the pandemic, lying to them about the safety of their schools. This led to profound sickness and death, including of children.

The Pennsylvania Rank-and-File Committee was formed to oppose the unsafe reopening of schools and agitated to keep the schools closed until the pandemic could be contained. After the death of a student at Olney Charter School in Philadelphia, it organized teacher opposition and helped to enforce the reimposition of remote classes against the orders of the PFT.



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