

Temple University rescinds health care and tuition remission for 750 striking grad students

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In a provocative move against graduate students exercising their right to strike, Temple University in Philadelphia on Wednesday announced it was ending tuition waivers and health care coverage for strikers. The academic workers, who are members of the Temple University Graduate Students' Association (TUGSA) Local 6290, walked out on January 31 to fight for improved wages and conditions.

Temple graduate students reported receiving an email from the university's bursar's office, stating that their tuition remission—in which the university waives some or all of a student's tuition—has been rescinded. The email further stated that students must pay the full balance by March 9, under penalty of a late fee and a financial hold on their student account, thereby curbing future registration for courses.

Part-time graduate students living in Pennsylvania pay on average about \$1,000 per credit hour, while out-of-state students pay about \$1,500 per credit hour.

Another email informed students that their health care coverage was terminated as a result of their participation in the strike.

The university has also sought to hire adjunct professors to replace the striking grad students, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* has reported.

In a Reddit posting, one student said, "We are entitled to insurance coverage under COBRA and terminating our plans without notice is illegal ... it demonstrates that Temple doesn't care whether its grad students (or their children and family members) live or die, and that is disgusting.

"I love my students and cannot wait to get to know them better when this is over. But make no mistake—the Temple administration is evil, and they don't give a

damn about any of us," the post stated.

Reports have surfaced of students who were unable to afford necessary prescriptions and who had to cancel doctor's appointments due to Temple's vindictive retaliation. Several international students who are striking say they are also being threatened with deportation.

Stephen Orbanek, Temple's director of communications, issued a statement to *Business Insider*, declaring "TUGSA members who have chosen not to work and are on strike are no longer entitled to their compensation and work-related benefits, which include tuition remission.'

Temple, the publication noted, was dealing with its striking workers "in harsher terms" than other universities who had seen strikes in recent months.

By imposing exorbitant tuition costs on striking grad students, university officials are implicitly treating them as students, not employees. This is the same reactionary position major universities held for decades to prohibit grad students from unionizing.

Over 750 Temple University graduate teaching assistants and research assistants have been on strike since January 31. They are demanding an increase from their current base rate of \$19,500 a year to \$32,800. In addition, they are demanding better work conditions, health care coverage for their dependents and more generous parental leave policies.

For its part, Temple is promising a miserly three percent pay raise, topping out at little more than \$22,600 by 2026. This would amount to less than 50 percent of what is considered a living wage in the city of Philadelphia.

The struggle at Temple is one of a growing number of

strikes by academic workers. Late last year, 48,000 grad students, post-docs, student researchers and other workers struck for six weeks at the University of California. Adjunct professors have also recently struck at The New School in New York City and the University of Illinois Chicago.

In Woburn, Massachusetts, 500 teachers struck in defiance of anti-strike laws until they were forced back to work by the Woburn Teachers' Association. In Los Angeles, over 30,000 custodians, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, special education assistants and other support staff of the Los Angeles Unified School District are holding a strike authorization vote.

At Temple, graduate students have held regular rallies near the university bell tower since the strike began. There is immense support for their struggle within the campus community and the broader city. Undergraduate students have circulated calls for a campuswide walkout on Wednesday, February 15. A statement announcing the walkout to professors reads, in part, "I understand that this is a highly complicated matter which is likely conflicting for many faculty members... I also understand that a win for TUGSA paves the way for better, fairer negotiations for TAUP [Temple Association of University Professionals] when the time comes."

In response to the groundswell of support, Temple has issued threats. An email sent to undergraduates states "This week, we became aware of flyers posted around campus, emails and social media messages that urge you not to attend classes or complete assignments and to participate in a walkout—actions that could jeopardize your academic goals."

Although there is widespread support for the strike, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the parent union of TUGSA, has isolated the struggle. The AFT has agreed to a no-strike clause for its various affiliated unions, including the TAUP faculty union on campus.

On Thursday, TUGSA held a press conference to address the university's latest threats, where they invited various Democratic Party politicians to pose as strike supporters. Larry Krasner, District Attorney for the city of Philadelphia, said nothing of substance, thanking students for engaging in nonviolent protest and calling on the university to be "fair" with them.

But the Democratic Party is a party of big business, no less an enemy of workers than the Republicans.

Biden boasts that he is the "most pro-union president" in history. But the president and the Democratic Party are allied with the *union bureaucracy*, which they use to suppress the class struggle and impose the dictates of big business.

This was shown in Congress's decision to outlaw a strike by 120,000 railroad workers last year and impose a pro-company contract on them that workers had previously rejected. Just last week, Massachusetts Democratic Governor Maura Healey reiterated her support for the state's ban on strikes by teachers and other public employees.

Instead of fruitless appeals to corporate-controlled politicians, Temple University grad students must appeal to the broadest sections of the working class—public school teachers, transit workers and others—to fight the university's strikebreaking threats. Grad students should follow the example of University of California strikers and form a rank-and-file committee to transfer power of the union apparatus to workers themselves. This committee must exercise veto-power over any efforts by the AFT to shut down the strike and impose the dictates of the university and the corporate and financial interests behind it.



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