

Temple University students rally in support of striking grad students as union promotes Democrats

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Temple University graduate students and research assistants have received mass support from the student population and workers in the Philadelphia region as they have entered their third week on strike.

Since January 31, strikers representing the university's 750 graduate students have been striking for living wages. Currently, TU grads receive a base wage of \$19,500 a year in a city with a cost of living that is nearly \$40,000. They are demanding wage improvements of 50 percent, which will bring their yearly wages to \$32,800, which is still below the poverty line for a family of four in this expensive east coast city. Temple has refused to budge in its offer of a 3 percent wage increase, topping out yearly wages at little more than \$22,000 by 2026.

On Wednesday, a mass student demonstration in support of the striking grad and research assistants was held at the campus. Hundreds turned out in support of teacher assistants and also to oppose the TU administration's provocative elimination of health care and tuition remission for the strikers.

At least 1,000 students marched down Broad Street in the center of campus, chanting slogans opposing "Temple's greed" and demanding a living wage for the striking grads. Prior to the walkout, Temple sent another threatening email to its undergrad students, stating the "university is aware of calls for students and others to take part in a walkout in support of the strike this afternoon at 2 p.m. We strongly encourage students to attend classes and stay on track with your studies."

On February 8, Temple informed the striking students that "you are participating in the TUGSA [Temple University Graduate Students Association] strike and are no longer performing your job duties. As a result,

your tuition remission has been removed for the spring semester." The school gave the students one month, until March 9, to pay back the full semester's cost or else be placed in default.

It similarly cut off medical insurance, leaving students with massive out-of-pocket costs for potentially life-saving medications. The Philadelphia *Inquirer* cites the experience of Hadley Leary, a first-year grad with a masters degree in the fine arts and "a \$12,000 tuition bill and no pay for being a striking member of the graduate student union."

Leary has an autoimmune disorder which forces her to pay nearly \$7,000 a month in medical expenses. Faced with the possibility of paying for a \$20,000 college degree, she said she would "likely drop out."

"I'm not even a grad student worker but this ... is really starting to piss me off. If anything this is driving me to be on the picket line protesting," said a student in response to the administration's attack.

Others indicated they wanted to see an even broader turn out from the campus workforce in support of the grad students. "If only they could get that many TAs to actually strike," stated one. "By failing to strike now, they are consenting to a world where they get the same treatment after they graduate."

Numerous grad students addressed the crowd, explaining their social conditions that led them to strike as well as Temple's thuggish behavior intended to intimidate workers.

"Just before the strike began, Temple sent us international students an email about how to keep our student status legal for the semester. There was just one catch," said an international student who worked in the College of Science and Technology, "for the first time,

Temple used the word ‘deportation’ more than once... an implicit threat that most international students understood.”

Speaking on the email’s contents, he noted, “penalties for failing to follow the rules will result in loss of F1 [immigration] status and all related benefits and could lead to removal and deportation from the United States.” Following these direct threats, he noted Temple’s “audacity to claim that a majority of international students are not striking because they think their contracts are fair.” He called the university administration “nothing but ghouls,” more concerned “with how deep their pockets are.”

The university’s decision to force tuition repayment is a ruthless assault on the striking students as well as the right to a quality education. The university is raising the prospect of a mass firing of grad students unless they accept Temple’s demands. This would result in the loss of possibly hundreds of teaching assistants, leaving no one to teach dozens, if not hundreds, of courses.

Temple has prepared for this possibility by hiring or re-deploying other campus faculty to serve as scabs even in cases where the instructor lacks credentials.

TUGSA has appealed to the university to live up to its “values” as an institution of higher learning. TUGSA Local 6290 followed up the mass student protest by allowing yet another wave of local elected Democratic Party officials to address the strikers on Thursday.

The parade of local, state and national Democratic Party officials giving perfunctory pledges to “stand with” the grad students has been used in an attempt to lull grad students, promoting illusions in the two party political system and serving as a brake on their movement.

Meanwhile, TUGSA, and other campus unions, while promoting false Democratic Party “friends,” has undermined the strike by keeping workers affiliated in the same union on campus working.

On Tuesday, representatives of both Temple and TUGSA Local 6290 returned to the negotiating table. According to the *Inquirer*, both Temple and TUGSA called their talks “productive,” with union negotiators stating, “the union is willing to negotiate, but needs to see evidence that the university is serious about making a salary adjustment and not just an incremental raise on

a very low salary.”

In other words, the TUGSA leadership is working to wind up the strike as soon as possible on the basis of Temple’s agreement to a slightly larger wage offer that will still leave graduate students deeply impoverished.

In addition, the TUGSA representative said nothing about the status of strikers’ other demands, such as cost of living raises, better working conditions and the inclusion of spouses and dependents on health care plans. It is entirely possible that one or more of these critical issues has been abandoned, as was done during the University of California grad student strike last year when negotiators summarily dropped cost of living raises from the list of demands before summarily ending the strike.

Rather than allow a similar development to occur in their own strike, Temple University grads must form their own independent rank-and-file committee to break the isolation that TUGSA and the American Federation of Teachers has enforced, and expand their struggle. This should include a direct appeal to other teachers, who support the strike but are straitjacketed by the Temple Association of University Professionals, which has forbidden any solidarity strike action.

Against Temple’s threat to plunge its teaching assistants and researchers into destitution through imposing a rotten agreement, the latter must respond with a determined struggle to broaden their fight in order to break the university’s intransigence to win what they need as well as defend the right to education more broadly.



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