

Temple University graduate students overwhelmingly reject sellout contract, continue strike

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Are you a striking Temple grad student? Tell us why you voted against the contract by filling out the form below. All submissions will remain anonymous.

Striking graduate students and research assistants at Temple University voted overwhelmingly on Tuesday to reject a Tentative Agreement (TA) between the university and the Temple University Graduate Student Association (TUGSA) Local 6290. Strikers instead chose to continue their three-weeks-long job action to earn considerable cost-of-living increases.

The result was 92 percent against the contract on an extremely high turnout of 83 percent of eligible voters.

Pay increases, a major issue in the Temple strike, would have been minimal under the deal, rising from the current \$19,500 annually to \$21,500, and then to \$23,600 by 2026. TUGSA had claimed it would fight for pay increases to \$32,600, still below Philadelphia's costs of living, but substantially higher than the university's offer.

As for dependent care, TUGSA said, Temple offered "no monetary support" in the TA, and that the university would "look into 'more affordable plans' for dependents, but without any guarantees on when/how/or what this would entail."

In addition to refusing to provide adequate compensation and benefits, the university has provocatively and recklessly sought to attack and intimidate workers on strike. Earlier this month, the university removed healthcare benefits from TUGSA members who had joined the pickets. This was followed by the removal of tuition remissions, which placed the full cost of enrollment on the poorly-paid student workers.

The resounding "no" vote is a direct rebuke of the

Temple University administration as well as the union bargaining committee. The negotiations have refused to address even the striking workers' most basic demands. It is also a repudiation of the attempts by the administration, the corporate press and various union bureaucrats to present the mere existence of an agreement as automatically meaning the end of the strike. By rejecting the contract, strikers intervened against this bald-faced attempt to prematurely wind up the strike.

It is urgent that Temple grads organize independently of TUGSA leaders to meet the university's intransigence with equal determination to expand the strike to all sections of faculty and the Philadelphia region. The strike must become part of a counteroffensive to reclaim the concessions which workers' have been forced to endure for decades at the hands of capitalists working through the union bureaucracy to isolate and sell out struggles.

"Voting yes for me would have endorsed the vile union busting tactics [Temple University] used," wrote a striking grad student on Twitter. They stated that the university's "Withholding healthcare as a weapon is unacceptable and we won't settle until Temple makes it clear they've learned that lesson."

Following the vote, TUGSA published a series of testimonies from its members explaining why they voted "no." Members explained that the TA "offered no substantive relief to international graduate students with dependents," that it "leaves some members behind" and that it would force them "to sacrifice daily necessities to live where I work."

TUGSA, seeking to cover for its role in bringing the sellout agreement up for a vote, declared that the

“Tentative Agreement did not meet many of TUGSA’s core demands. It contained minimal raises and no healthcare coverage for dependents.”

The union posted a self-serving explanation of its negotiating “strategy” on Twitter. “[Temple University] made this offer,” TUGSA claimed, as if its negotiators were duty-bound to accept it. The post goes on to claim, “In order to ensure the legitimacy of that vote, the CNT [contract negotiating team] agreed to tentatively agree to the offer.”

TUGSA’s statement claims that, thanks to the membership’s vote, “we believe we have a democratic mandate to return to the table quickly and settle a contract that provides members with what they need and can pass ratification.”

What a cynical lie! In fact, there was nothing “legitimate” about the university’s insulting offer, which acceded to none of the strikers’ demands, nor the decision to bring it to a vote. The negotiators could have saved their members’ time by throwing the rotten offer in the trash where it belonged.

By agreeing to bring the TA to a vote, TUGSA gave Temple and the Philadelphia media an opening to declare that the strike was ended. This sowed confusion and demoralization.

The *Philadelphia Inquirer*, in response to the TA’s rejection, continued its drumbeat against the strike by equating it with the recent campus shooting of a police officer. The strike’s continuation “surely means more headaches for a university already in crisis as it copes with the aftermath of the shooting death of one of its police officers,” it states.

In addition to the university and the press, TUGSA’s state affiliate, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) Pennsylvania, joined in with the effort to sow disinformation about the strike, showering premature congratulations over pay increases not won. “You helped win better pay for teaching and research assistants and to end this strike,” president Arthur G. Steinberg was quoted in an AFT Pennsylvania tweet on Friday, four days before the TA vote.

In response to the TA’s rejection, AFT president Randi Weingarten tweeted an evasive statement, declaring the “no” vote a product of Temple University’s “attitude and actions,” not that the contract completely failed to meet their demands.

On Tuesday, as graduate students were finally voting

on the TA, former *New York Times* labor reporter Steven Greenhouse also tweeted his approval of the Temple grad students’ “deal to end their strike.”

Greenhouse, a longstanding defender of the union bureaucracy, moderated the candidates’ debate last year for the first-ever direct presidential election in the United Auto Workers (UAW). During the debate, he used an obviously unreliable source to misattribute positions to Will Lehman, a rank-and-file candidate running to abolish the union apparatus. The election is currently in a run off between two lifelong union bureaucrats—current UAW president Ray Curry and opponent Shawn Fain—as the result of the deliberate denial of its members’ right to vote in the first round.

Will Lehman, a socialist and UAW presidential candidate from the Mack Trucks plant in Allentown, Pennsylvania, has spoken out publicly against the UAW’s denial of members’ right to vote. Lehman submitted a 120-page complaint detailing the many violations of members’ democratic rights by the union in the election.

On Monday, Lehman visited the strikers on the picket line to express his solidarity with their struggle. “I spoke with striking graduate students at Temple University who are demanding a 50 percent wage increase, health care for dependents and families, and better parental and bereavement leave,” the auto worker stated on Twitter .

Lehman posted interviews with striking Temple workers, noting, “these workers need support for their strike to grow.” He noted that, “this will not be done by TUGSA or the AFT, but by the formation of a rank-and-file committee that links up with autoworkers and workers in other industries to expand the strike.”



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