

The way forward for striking Temple graduate students after rejection of sellout contract

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22 February 2023

The Temple University graduate students' 92 percent vote to reject the rotten tentative agreement (TA) Tuesday night has raised fundamental questions of strategy and class orientation for the striking university teaching and research assistants.

The sellout contract offer solved none of the pressing demands the 750 members of the Temple University Graduate Student Association (TUGSA) Local 6290 face. The workers have been on strike since late January. Their demands for a living wage, expanded medical coverage for their families, flexible parental leaves and other basic requirements have been callously ignored by the university, which has deployed every underhanded tactic and trick to weaken their resolve.

In response to the rejection vote, Temple's Chief Operating Officer Ken Kaiser published a message to the university community declaring the school was "disappointed" with the outcome. "Although the TUGSA leadership left the Friday meeting promising to unanimously recommend the agreement for ratification, the TUGSA membership did not ratify the agreement," he said.

While TUGSA has denied this claim, its leadership has proven itself incapable and unwilling to conduct a genuine defense of its members' interests. This has led to it working in tandem with Temple to produce a tentative offer no better than the one which led them to strike in the first place.

The TUGSA contract negotiating team (CNT) has claimed that the resounding "no" vote has given the negotiators "a democratic mandate to return to the table quickly and settle a contract that provides members with what they need and can pass ratification." But whatever the bargaining committee is saying now, after

the fact, a rejection is clearly not the outcome that it was hoping for. The only possible purpose in bringing a deal to a vote which includes none of the strikers' demands was to try to shut down the strike.

In fact, TUGSA negotiators already had a "democratic mandate" to reject the university's poverty pay offers when they first went on strike. The university's "concessions," which amount to minor shifts in the rate of pay over the course of the contract, were worth less than the paper that they were printed on.

The TUGSA negotiators are completely in the thrall of the university. When Temple "made this offer and said to bring it to the members for a vote," the bargaining committee did just that. Rather than refusing the thuggish offer, the negotiators worked wholeheartedly "to ensure the legitimacy of that vote." TUGSA's staff then worked to enforce a strict gag order on members, forbidding any discussion of the rotten contract offer publicly.

But while it does not appear that it campaigned openly for its ratification, neither did it call for it to be rejected. Moreover, it handed to the administration and corporate press the ability to conduct a public relations campaign portraying the mere existence of the TA as meaning the automatic end of the strike. Before the ink on the TA's paper was dry, Temple issued a statement to the local media declaring that the strike was over. It then sent a campus-wide email saying the same thing. This ambush attack sowed confusion and demoralization among the striking campus workers and their supporters. In fact, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* published an article along these lines even before the announcement of the deal by the Temple

administration, pointing to the existence of plans worked out in advance to shove the contract down strikers' throats.

This false claim was also taken up by the Pennsylvania American Federation of Teachers, TUGSA's parent union. AFT-Pennsylvania President Arthur Steinberg released statements celebrating the strike's ending, absurdly declaring "While the details are not yet available, it's clear that the pressure our union put on the University ... will result in a more favorable contract for TUGSA members."

The AFT, whose President Randi Weingarten brings in a hefty \$564,000 a year to sell out teachers' struggles, has not sent the striking students one cent in strike benefits, even as members are forced to subsist on donations and food kitchens. In response to the TA's rejection, Weingarten merely cited Temple's "attitude" as the problem, suggesting a "friendlier" partnership between TUGSA and Temple would have gotten the deal ratified.

The effort to sell out the strike was only halted when the rank and file members rallied to reject the sellout offer and voted almost 10 to 1 against it.

Temple graduate students must recognize they are in a two-front war against both the administration and their own leadership. TUGSA leaders have bent over backwards to placate Temple's intransigence.

Students require an effective strategy and organization to expand their strike and bring Temple administrators to their knees. The AFT has signed enfeebling "no strike" clauses with other campus bargaining units, forcing them to remain quiet as the strike goes on.

Instead, graduate students and other workers must take the initiative into their own hands. In bringing the contract to a vote, the existing bargaining committee has proven that they cannot be trusted to lead this struggle. They must be thrown out and replaced with a new bargaining committee, elected from the rank and file and not from aspiring union bureaucrats. Graduate students must organize themselves to turn out broadly to unite with their peers at Temple and expand their strike throughout the college and the city in order to force Temple to negotiate favorably.

The support such a strategy can receive is evident in the many acts of solidarity that the strike has generated. Rather than allowing themselves to be isolated and

betrayed by the bureaucratic trade unions, workers must take the initiative upon themselves before it is too late. We encourage striking workers to contact the *World Socialist Web Site*, which stands ready to lend all efforts to assist in this struggle.



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