

University of Michigan graduate student workers move closer to strike

Our reporters
24 February 2023

Over 2,000 graduate student workers at the University of Michigan have been negotiating for a new three-year contract since November 2022. Their current contract expires on May 1. On Tuesday, an all-membership emergency meeting was held by the graduate student worker union after all their demands were rejected by the university's human resource negotiators in the newest proposal.

Several of the proposals by the Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO) at UM, which is affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), center around improving the living and working conditions of graduate student workers. These include a \$14,500 raise as an adjustment based on estimates of cost of living and inflation, subsidies for food and transportation, better health insurance coverage, improved support for student parents, and reduced class size. There are also proposals for reduced campus policing and protections for immigrant and transgender students, among other demands.

The university administration turned down all the GEO's demands and proposed a counteroffer of a 3 percent wage increase, which is lower than the current inflation rate and effectively a wage cut.

The day before the university's rejections, an article appeared in the *Michigan Daily*, the official campus publication, entitled "GEO's contract demands are unreasonable and extravagant." Despite nominally being an opinion piece by an undergraduate student, the article was a right-wing attack that no doubt represented the university's response to students' demands. Intending to portray the grad students as greedy and selfish, it is an early attempt to drive a wedge between graduate and undergraduate students and muddy the waters over the highly exploitive nature of graduate student work.

Tuesday's emergency meeting drew an overflow audience of approximately 600 graduate student workers, who met to discuss a possible strike in the event their demands are not met. Those in attendance expressed their determination to fight for a living wage and a safe working environment.

When asked "who is or knows someone who is struggling through grad school," everyone in attendance raised their hands. A PhD student in social work shared that he works 12 hours a day to do research and finish teaching obligations. However, he then also must work another 20-hour part-time job outside of the university to pay for rent.

Whenever the discussion at the meeting turned to "striking" or "walkouts" it drew applause from the audience. The GEO leadership did not call for a strike authorization vote, but instead proposed a "pledge" to authorize a strike that would be set in mid-March, if the next round of demands are rejected again.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to graduate students leaving the meeting. They passed out a statement on the lessons of the 2020 GEO strike, issued by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality at UM, as well as statements against the current US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine.

Those who stopped to speak indicated that there was overwhelming support to strike for better working and living conditions, and also expressed opposition to war.

A first-year graduate student commented, "I voted yes on the pledge. I've been sitting in on the bargaining meetings, and it's ridiculous. The university is striking down any proposal we put forward. The counterproposal is a pay cut. I'm privileged with a partner with a full-time salary, but most of my coworkers don't have that. It's [currently] \$24,000." The MIT Living Wage Calculator estimates that graduate students need approximately \$38,500 for a living wage.

The same student worker noted that many graduate student workers were aware of the current Temple graduate student strike and noted that she took part in several marches for the Michigan Medicine nurses, who were in a contract struggle in Summer-Fall of 2022. "I welcome the idea of supporting and joining other workers. I was at the march for Michigan Medicine nurses. But this is all new to me," she noted.

The Michigan Medicine nurses were ultimately pressured by the hospital and the MNA-UMPNC leadership to accept a

sellout contract that did not resolve staffing shortages, forced overtime and unsafe working conditions, among other demands.

A seventh-year graduate student spoke in support of a strike authorization and called upon his experience in the 2020 strike. “I learned a lot, more in the first two weeks [of the 2020 strike] than a lot of PhD students learn in decades. At the level of administration, we got a lot of highfalutin rhetoric that didn’t match their action.”

An undergraduate student outside the meeting said that he supported the graduate student workers and thinks there is likely broad support for them among undergraduates, such as resident housing and food services staff, who are also heavily exploited on campus. Both undergraduate and graduate workers have often had to serve as frontline workers in unsafe conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic, with little to no protection.

The student also expressed his thoughts on the danger of war between nuclear powers. “I want to at least live to be 30, I hope. That’s the goal. I hope this doesn’t further escalate. It’s like a strange issue for me because my family is from Russia, they are anti-Putin and pro-America living here. I’m not fully pro-America and not being pro-Putin, using Ukraine as a proxy escalating this. I hope I can buy a house one day and afford it. I don’t want to live in a nuclear wasteland.”

The graduate student workers in the GEO—who represent teaching instructors (GSI), research assistants (GSRA), student staff assistants (GSSA) and PHD and Masters students—deserve the broadest possible support for their demands. Most universities, even elite institutions like University of Michigan, began pressuring departments decades ago to increasingly shift heavy teaching burdens onto the more vulnerable graduate student workers and lecturers, while simultaneously attacking tenure protections for faculty.

Just as in 2020, there is strong support for graduate student workers at University of Michigan. A January open letter of support has already been signed by close to 400 students, staff and faculty.

But a warning must also be made. The broader challenges graduate students face are not of a trade union character, but of a political and social character. It is critical that graduate student workers draw the important lessons of the 2020 strike, and from situation facing students and workers more broadly.

The emerging struggles of graduate students at UM are part of a larger fight by academic workers around the country, including the ongoing Temple University graduate student strike, as well as the similar strikes at the University of California and Columbia University, both of which were

betrayed by the UAW bureaucracy. They are also taking place among enormous strikes among the working class globally, which is the powerful social force to which the graduate must turn to.

It is in this sense that the fight against war is also critical. The Democrats, working with the Republicans, are currently fighting to escalate a NATO-provoked war with Russia in Ukraine that could lead a nuclear annihilation of the planet. To pursue this reckless policy, there is no limit to the amount of money they will invest in military funding and endless war, including already over \$50 billion given to the Ukraine.

In fact, the day before the GEO all membership meeting, the University of Michigan warmly welcomed the warmonger Alexander Vindman to speak at the same building. His event was a full throated call for greater funding and a massive escalation in advanced weaponry to prepare for an escalation of a war that has already reportedly produced over 200,000 casualties.

In order to increase funding for deeply unpopular wars, the Democrats and Republicans must suppress the growing struggles of the working class, which are almost uniformly over the need for better wages, safer working conditions, health care benefits, increased funding education and social services, and other basic, fundamental rights. But for these demands, workers are told there is no money and that their demands are “not realistic.”

It is also critical that graduate student workers not confine their struggle within the framework of campus and “bread-and-butter” trade union politics. The American Federation of Teachers and other bureaucratic unions around the country specialize in isolating struggles, suppressing independent opposition and tying everything to the interests of the war-mad Democratic Party and anti-working class layers who orient themselves to them, like the Democratic Socialist of America (DSA), which seeks to ensure these struggles do not leave the orbit of the Democratic Party.

Nothing serious can be won from putting pressure on the university administration and board of regents, the latter of which is explicitly tied to the Democratic Party. It is critical that graduate students begin orienting their struggle to the working class, and to insist on a broad political discussion about the issues and elaborate a strategy to win their demands.



To contact the WWSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wws.org/contact