

Temple University undergraduates rally in support of grad students as strike continues into second month

Our reporters
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Are you a striking graduate student at Temple, or a Temple student who supports the strike? Contact the World Socialist Web Site by filling out the form below to begin building a rank-and-file strike committee to mobilize students and workers against the administration's threats.

Nearly 300 Temple University students rallied and marched in support of striking graduate students Tuesday, even as the school has sought to ramp up its intimidation against the campus workers and their supporters. Graduates in the Temple University Graduate Students Association (TUGSA) Local 6290, an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers, have been on strike since January 31.

“I’ve been striking for five weeks now because Temple graduates make less than \$20,000 a year and we need living wages,” said Jesus, a striking teaching assistant in the school’s department of Spanish and Portuguese in comments to the *World Socialist Web Site*. “We need to make sure our families have access to healthcare provided by our employer and we need to have a stable source of income.”

The workers have demanded raises from \$19,500 a year to \$32,800 as well as healthcare coverage for their families. In addition, they are demanding more flexible parental leave policies. Currently, a campus worker who gives birth will only receive five paid days of leave from Temple.

The university, for its part, has offered its workers an insulting 3 percent raise which will top out at \$23,600 by 2026. In a tentative agreement which workers voted down by 92 percent last week, the university offered 10 days of paid parental leave.

Hundreds rallied at the event, which was called

“Students and Union Workers Shut Down Temple University.” It was organized by several campus student groups in solidarity with the striking workers. They rallied despite the event occurring during the busy midterms testing period.

“I’m a worker and I believe that a victory for one worker is a victory for all workers,” Alexi, a Temple student, said to WSWS reporters when asked why attending was so important to her. “When I strike, they’re going to be there for me, so it’s important for me and everybody to be here for them now.”

Carmen, a research technician, said she worked with several Temple graduate students at her job and had come to support them. Carmen agreed with the WSWS’s demand to expand the strike to other sections of university workers, adding “we’re not going to get what we want unless we are all together fighting for our rights.”

Currently, only the university’s graduate workers are on strike. Numerous workers in affiliated campus unions support the strike but are restricted from showing open support by onerous “no strike” clauses inserted into their contracts with the support of the AFT.

The university has sought to crack down on various acts of solidarity. On February 4, the university provocatively cut striking workers’ health benefits, leading many to beg for charity to purchase essential medications. A week later, the university demanded that students pay back the cost of tuition to the university by March 8 or face penalties and possible firing.

“Without those benefits, they will be treated the same as every other enrolled student,” Temple spokesperson

Stephen Orbanek told *Temple News*, the campus newspaper.

Striking graduate workers perform essential work that the university requires to function. “I’m showing solidarity with the teaching assistants and research assistants who put the time and the effort in to improve our education,” explained David, an undergraduate, to the WSWS.

Support for the workers stretches far beyond the event, something which the university and various union bureaucracies involved are acutely aware of and wish to stifle. “I know the importance of striking. I had zero intention of going until the strike was resolved,” said an undergraduate on social media.

The “only thing is our scab [instructor] is really buckling down on attendance and is not allowing any makeup tests for any reason,” they said. Other students explained that the instructor brought in to teach their classes was incompetent because “there’s no guidance and the midterm was glitchy.” The midterm tests consisted of “open notes ripped straight out of the Pearson Reveal quizzes but none of the answers to the questions matched up.”

Last week, TUGSA leaders sought to justify returning the unpopular TA, addressing none of their members’ demands, with the claim that a strong “no” vote gave them a “democratic mandate to return to the table quickly and settle a contract that provides members with what they need and can pass ratification.”

A little over a week later, their strategy is increasingly threadbare as the university appears to be waiting out the strike as the deadline for tuition repayment comes nearer. Ken Kaiser, Temple’s chief operating officer, dedicated the majority of an email titled “Update on the TUGSA strike” to praising a Temple police officer who was killed in the line of duty, continuing an effort to present the ongoing strike as indirectly contributing to crime.

“This past week was a difficult one for the entire Temple University community. All our time, efforts and attention were rightfully focused on the family of Sergeant Fitzgerald. He will never be forgotten,” the email said.

Similarly, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* wrote an article Tuesday covering a small student protest demanding more police officers on the campus. The *Inquirer* has been central to an effort to shut down the strike. The

corporate-controlled, Democratic Party-aligned publication ran a story declaring that the emergence of a tentative agreement meant that the strike was over even before the university announced the TA’s existence.

On Tuesday, the school-run *Temple News* published an underhanded hit piece to dampen support for the strikers, titled “Non-striking TUGSA members feel left behind.” The article invokes identity politics by citing anonymous “TUGSA members” to declare “a majority of TUGSA members are white and lack consideration for students of color. There were issues, like lack of representation within graduate programs, that weren’t included in negotiations with Temple.”

In fact, as Tuesday’s event revealed, there is immense support for the strike among students, faculty and the community. The situation is urgent. They must mobilize to come to the defense of the striking graduate students and force the administration to back down from its threats. But this requires a new strategy and orientation from the one on offer from TUGSA, which is desperately trying to reach a deal with the administration to shut the strike down before any demands have been met.

The way forward for graduate students is to take matters into their own hands by forming an independent rank-and-file strike committee to enforce democratic control over their own struggle, and to appeal to students, faculty and campus workers as well as the working class across Philadelphia to support their struggle.



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