

# Temple University grad students dragged into dead-end appeals to the Democratic Party as tuition deadline looms

Nick Barrickman  
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The strike of several hundred striking Temple University graduate workers entered its sixth week on Monday. The workers' situation is increasingly dire as the university's March 9 deadline for paying tuition fees approaches on Thursday.

Graduate workers affiliated with the Temple University Graduate Students Association (TUGSA) Local 6290 have been on strike since January 31, demanding a living wage of at least \$32,800 per year, as well as cost of living increases, family medical benefits and expanded parental leave. Workers at Temple are currently paid less than \$20,000 in Philadelphia, a city with an average cost of living of nearly \$40,000.

On Monday, Temple president Jason Wingard announced on social media that "Tomorrow we continue conversations with TUGSA, focused on the fairness and progress that have been the building blocks of our historic 80-plus negotiations with 11 of Temple's unions over the years." Wingard noted the administration was "working hard to find a resolution because we know that this strike has far-reaching impacts in our community."

One month ago Temple took the provocative step of cutting striking workers' access to medical benefits. On Tuesday, the university administration announced it would reinstate the health insurance, citing the "good faith effort" of TUGSA in negotiations—an indication that the parent union, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), may be moving to pull the plug on the struggle. "[W]e are pleased with the progress," said Ken Kaiser, Chief Operating Officer. "We hope to share positive news soon."

Returning health care coverage to graduate workers is

no concession. It is part of the administration's strategy to drag out talks, offering tentative agreements that addressed none of the demands, while using the threat of impoverishment to force desperate workers to leave picket lines and go back to their classrooms, laboratories, and offices.

The demand that students pay back tuition remittances remains. Tuition bills come due Thursday, and late penalties will immediately be invoked. This policy will either bankrupt students or make them unable to enroll at Temple for another semester and pursue their work. International students would likewise lose their temporary visa status to remain in the United States if they are unable to take classes.

Temple University workers, faculty, and students face the same problems. Professors confront wage stagnation, class size increases, program elimination, and decreases in tenured positions. Undergraduate students have suffered years of tuition increases. Now their education is being impoverished by the absence of striking teaching assistants. Students and other university workers have shown their support in rallies and walkouts, as well as by boycotting classes being taught by replacement scabs.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has persistently called for the expansion of the struggle. Not only undergraduates, but all sections of the Temple University workforce—adjuncts, faculty, clerical and maintenance workers—must be called out. The strike should likewise reach out for support among Philadelphia workers, and to the entire Pennsylvania system of higher education, where workers face the same issues. Such an expansion of the struggle requires the creation of committees representing the rank-and-

file.

The AFT opposes such a course of action because it would upset its relations with the Democratic Party, which controls city hall in Philadelphia and the governor's mansion in Harrisburg—though it is plain that if the TUGSA local is defeated at one of Pennsylvania's flagship universities, college and high school administrators will press the offensive throughout the state.

How little support TUGSA has received from other unions is underscored by the fact that members of the AFT in other bargaining units at Temple, as well as other university unions, have been forced to cross its picket lines—allegedly prevented from lending assistance through a system of no-strike clauses.

The AFT has not even granted TUGSA members any strike pay. This is having a notable impact on the number of TUGSA members joining the picket lines. On Monday, *Inside Higher Ed* published an article which cited a striking TUGSA member who admitted that “a large portion of those who can't join the strike is because of financial security.”

On Friday, the Temple Association of University Professionals (TAUP), like TUGSA, an AFT-affiliated union with over 2,500 members, held an online public meeting to discuss the possibility of a toothless “no confidence” vote in university president Jason Wingard.

According to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, “Some argued for it, noting ... the mishandling of the graduate student strike, during which the university has stopped paying for health care and tuition remission for striking members.” In addition, faculty also denounced “noncontract renewals for some non-tenure faculty, mounting concerns about public safety in the wake of the February killing of a Temple police officer while he was on duty, and vacancies in some key administrative jobs.”

In the end, the TAUP delayed the vote until March 17. “If the motion is successful,” the TAUP said in a statement, “[it] will initiate an official vote of no confidence the following week.” The results of the vote, basically an opinion poll, may come out by April.

This pathetic “solidarity” statement is part and parcel of the fundamental strategy shared by the TUGSA, TAUP, the AFT, and the other unions who tell graduate workers not to appeal to other workers, but to the

Democratic Party officials, big business leaders and trade union representatives which run the Board of Trustees at Temple. Similarly, TUGSA leaders on Monday staged photo-ops with Democratic state senators in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania's capital. Needless to say, such forays are worse than useless.

The division of Temple workers against each other is also facilitated by the ideology that is central to the Democratic Party and American capitalism, the use of racial identity politics. According to the *Inquirer*, “some voiced concern” at the TAUP meeting “that taking a vote of no confidence against Temple's first Black president after he's been on the job less than two years does not send the right message.” For its part, the administration has insinuated that TUGSA is a bastion of “white students” indifferent to the needs of minorities. In fact, the graduate workers are multiracial and multinational.

On January 31, the day Temple grads began their strike, Temple's “Center for Anti-Racism” hosted Ibram X. Kendi, a Temple alumnus and a leading figure in the lucrative “antiracist” industry. Kendi regularly receives five-figure sums for short talks about his theories, which center on the idea that race is the central division in society and that racism has been indelibly “stamped from the beginning” of history, as the title of one of his books has it.

Last summer, Kendi received \$22,500 for a single one-hour Zoom discussion given to a public library in northern Virginia. This is a sum greater than the yearly wage of a Temple grad worker.



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