Striking Temple graduate workers offered another rotten contract

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Temple University and the Temple University Graduate Students Association (TUGSA) announced another tentative agreement (TA) last Thursday in a bid to end the six-week-long strike by 750 graduate student workers.

Voting has taken place over the weekend and results will be announced on Monday. This is the second contract up for a vote after members massively rejected the first in February.

The deal is predicated on a modest increase in base salaries that currently stand at roughly $21,000. The wage increases even out to about 5 percent per year over the next four years, less than the current 6 percent rate of inflation—in other words, the wage increase is very likely to turn out to be a de facto pay cut.

Both Temple administration and the TUGSA negotiating team (CNT), aligned with the parent union, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), patted themselves on the back for brokering the deal. TUGSA initially refused to announce the agreement's concrete details, handing the ball off to the Temple administration who released it to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. For the union, this is a tacit admission of another pro-management contract.

Ken Kaiser, Temple's senior vice president and chief operating officer, immediately attempted to bully the student workers into voting yes. He stated that the return of graduate students to their original classrooms may not be possible, since strikebreaker replacements have already been hired by the school. Ruthless tactics have been the modus operandi of Temple management. In February, the university revoked health care benefits and demanded graduate students pay tuition by March 9 or face fines and separation from their educational programs.

Yet in the same breath, Kaiser welcomed graduate students back to Temple, implying that the strike is over and ratification a forgone conclusion. "We appreciate how difficult a time this was for the entire university community, especially for our graduate students," Kaiser said. "I think the deal agreed to is fair for everyone and we look forward to having our graduate students back in the classroom and labs to continue the excellent work they do for our students and faculty and the university."

The details leaked to the press do not come close to meeting any of the demands fought for by graduate students when they walked out to picket on January 31.

The wage increase falls well short of the original $32,000 demand. In the first year of the contract, pay would increase to a paltry $24,000. Compared to the current salary of $20,700, the touted raise is less than $3,500 a year, or under $300 a month for the first year of the contract.

In the academic year 2026, which runs through spring 2027, pay tops out at $27,000, less than $100 per month for the final three years of the contract. Inflation, hovering around 6 percent this year with no sign of declining, will devour pay increases by the end of the contract. The wage proposal would in fact confine the graduate students to the bottom rungs of the most oppressed sections of Philadelphia's working class. For gas station attendants in the city, median pay is $25,300, while fast food workers earn about $30,000.

One striking graduate student noted, "If our wage increases are matched with inflation rates that means our quality of living will not have changed by much." Another, speaking on condition of anonymity, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "our leadership has endorsed a new TA that is honestly shit. It's an improvement, don't get me wrong… but strike fatigue has set in and they didn't push very hard. We are getting like a 20 percent raise… a far cry from acceptable."

Graduate students will still have to pay for dependents on their health care plans. Temple University will pick up only 25 percent of these costs, while 75 percent will be paid by graduate workers. With rapid increases in health care costs, graduate workers will very likely be paying more for their health care, not less, in the coming years. In addition, the administration is offering a miserly four days of bereavement leave and 21 days off for the birth of a child. However, it is not clear whether graduate students will receive full pay, partial pay or no pay at all when these benefits are used.

Finally, as a lump of sugar to help swallow the bitter contract, graduate students will be awarded a one-time $500 payment.

Temple's claims that it does not have enough money to pay graduate workers a decent wage are absurd.

The university sits on an endowment of nearly $875 million and collected revenue in 2021 of $165 million. The school president, Jason Wingard, a former banking executive, brings

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home roughly $1 million a year. In one recent year, 20 Temple administrators, coaches, and other university elite each pocketed over $400,000. These bloated salaries added up to roughly $16 million–enough to double the pay of 800 TAs from the present to roughly $20,000–$40,000!

Since the announcement of the TA, there has been a full court press to convince graduate students that it is a victory.

After it was leaked to the press, the TUGSA bargaining team instantly praised the deal, endorsed it and told its membership to vote yes.

In a statement released to the press, Matt Ford, head negotiator for TUGSA, said:

> After six weeks of striking, the strength of our members combined with the support from our political, community, and union allies pushed Temple to finally engage with our core demands. We are happy that Temple has finally recognized the value of its graduate employees and that both teams could come to this agreement.

Quickly after TUGSA made its announcement, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, Randi Weingarten, tweeted out congratulations, as if the vote had already taken place and as if the contract had been ratified by the rank and file. “Congrats to TUGSA & thanks to all the allies who stood with them through this fight,” Weingarten wrote at 11:28 p.m. on Thursday, less than two hours after TUGSA made its announcement.

Weingarten was beaten to the punch by the phony left Democratic politician Helen Gym, who hailed the deal as a “fair contract” on Twitter at 10:14 p.m., *less than half an hour after its announcement*. Pennsylvania state Sen. Nikil Saval, without knowing the details of the agreement and without the rank and file democratically voting on it, exclaimed in a tweet that the deal was “historic,” adding, “They set a new precedent. Congratulations on this win. Thank you for this win.”

The propaganda campaign to sell the rotten deal to graduate students is a reprisal of the performance after the announcement of the first proposed deal. Before voting on the first sellout contract even began, TUGSA’s parent union, the AFT of Pennsylvania, exclaimed, “Congratulations TUGSA on coming to a tentative agreement with Temple University and ending your strike!” Graduate students rejected the contract by over 90 percent.

The difference now is that graduate workers have been starved on the picket line, with *zero* strike pay from the AFT. Wenigarten, who “earns” $500,000 a year harvested from member dues, offered graduate students no strike benefits except for a supposedly interest-free loan. Popular support for the strike brought in substantial donations, but TUGSA and the AFT refused to divvy it out to the membership.

“I’m very disappointed in TUGSA and the AFT right now,” a striker explained to WSWS. “No disbursement of the strike fund and pushing people to vote for a meager raise… I have no qualms about TUGSA and the AFT being put on blast. With over $100,000 in a strike fund (donations), and almost none of it going to striking members, plus easing up at the negotiations table, they should be taken to task publicly. And for the record, TUGSA had full authority over the disbursement of its strike fund. It sucked that the AFT gave us little, if anything, but it was my union reps that kept it under lock and key.”

The graduate student workers have been systematically isolated by the unions, even though the AFT also “represents” a large faculty contingent at Temple who suffer from many of the same problems as the graduate workers, the Temple Association of University Professionals (TAUP), which has 2,500 members. Instead of reaching out to fellow workers to expand the struggle, graduate workers were told to place their confidence in the Democratic Party, with TUGSA leaders staging photo ops with politicians in Harrisburg and handing them the microphone at rallies. This, of course, is the same Democratic Party that populates key positions on the Temple University Board of Trustees and controls the governor’s mansion in Harrisburg.

Graduate students should vote no on this second sellout agreement, but this raises key strategic questions. What comes next after striking for seven weeks and being served up, twice, sellout deals sold by the unions and the Democrats?

The conduct of the strike cannot be left in the treacherous hands of TUGSA and the AFT. After the 90 percent rejection of the first deal, the TUGSA negotiating team has no democratic mandate to bargain on behalf of graduate workers.

Massive rank-and-file opposition, seen in the first no vote, needs to be transformed into a new organization, fighting for enough strike pay to win, reaching out broadly to workers, faculty and students in the school, city, and across the state and country.

A rank-and-file committee must be formed. Workers must demand the negotiating team be removed and replaced with trusted graduate students who place no faith in the AFT or the Democratic Party. Immediate steps must be taken to broaden the struggle to include all sections of the Temple University workforce, the undergraduate students, and to link up with university educators and high school teachers who face the same conditions everywhere. The WSWS stands ready to assist.

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