

Temple University strike ends with poverty contract

Harvey Simpkins
15 March 2023

On March 13, the Temple University Graduate Students' Association (TUGSA) announced ratification of an agreement that codifies poverty-level wages for the 750 graduate and teaching assistants it represents.

The agreement will increase the average salary from \$19,500 to \$24,000, with salaries rising to \$27,000 by the fourth year of the contract, in 2026. With inflation currently running at 6 per cent annually (and over 9 per cent last year), the agreement amounts to a small real wage increase. By comparison, the median pay for a fast-food worker in Philadelphia is \$30,000.

Temple University will now pay 25 per cent of dependent health care coverage, which was previously unpaid for—though health care inflation will cut into this, as well. Parental leave is increased from five business days to 21 calendar days and bereavement leave expanded by five days in the event of international travel. The new agreement also includes a first step grievance meeting with the university and the establishment of a joint union-university committee to update workload guidelines.

The agreement falls far short of TUGSA's stated demands at the start of the strike, which included a starting wage of \$32,800. The union called this salary demand a living wage "designed to bring graduate employee pay in line with living costs in Philadelphia based on the MIT Living Wage Calculator, as of January 2021 when negotiations began."

What TUGSA now calls a "historic" "fair contract" is \$8,800 less than what it deemed a "living wage" when the strike began.

TUGSA reports that the agreement passed by a vote of 344-8. Given the fact that the contract is so far removed from original demands, this result—which represents less than half of the bargaining unit—can only be taken as a vote of no confidence in the union. Graduate workers were worn down on the picket line with no pay, with tuition payments--vindictively demanded by the university--having come due, and separation from their programs of study threatened this week. The graduate workers concluded that this miserable contract was the best that could be hoped for,

given the union's conduct of the struggle.

Temple graduate students have been without a contract since February 2022. For over a year, TUGSA engaged in fruitless bargaining with the university. In November 2022, TUGSA members voted over 99 per cent in favor of a strike, which did not begin until January 31.

On February 17, TUGSA announced a tentative agreement which provided for salaries of \$21,500 in 2023, rising to \$23,600 in 2026, and with no health care payments by the university for dependents. The agreement was rejected by 92 percent of voting members.

After this initial agreement was voted down, TUGSA admitted that its contract negotiating team "agreed to tentatively agree to the offer." The University issued a statement after the contract rejection, noting that "the TUGSA leadership left the Friday meeting promising to unanimously recommend the agreement for ratification."

Within hours of the February 17 tentative agreement, various affiliates of the American Federation of Teachers (of which TUGSA is a part) rushed to claim the strike was over and that the unknown terms were a great victory. AFT Pennsylvania tweeted, "Congratulations TUGSA on coming to a tentative agreement with Temple University and ending your strike!" Along the same lines, the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers wrote, "Outstanding news this Friday evening! Congratulations and solidarity forever!"

Rather than attempting to expand the strike to other sectors of Temple workers, not to mention graduate students at other institutions, such as the University of Pittsburgh, where graduate students make a minimum of \$9,000 per term, TUGSA instead made appeals to state Democrats, one of the two capitalist parties responsible for the poverty wages paid to Temple graduate students.

On March 6, TUGSA leadership made a foray to the state capital in Harrisburg, about two hours away, to engage in photo-ops and fruitless appeals to Democratic state representatives and senators. One such Democratic state senator, Christine M. Tartaglione, sits on Temple's Board of Trustees, the very institution arrayed against the striking

workers.

On March 9, TUGSA's leadership unanimously endorsed the second tentative agreement, subsequently ratified on March 13. Prior to ratification, TUGSA stated that the tentative agreement "addresses the union's core demands of increased wages, more affordable dependent healthcare, reasonable leave policies, and better working conditions."

As with the initial tentative agreement, union bureaucrats and union-backed Democrats praised the tentative agreement before members had voted on it. Less than two hours after the announcement of the tentative agreement by TUGSA, AFT President Randi Weingarten tweeted, "Congrats to TUGSA & thanks to all the allies who stood with them through this fight."

Helen Gym, the AFT-backed candidate for Philadelphia mayor, tweeted less than 30 minutes after the announcement, "Congratulations @TUGSA_6290! A fair contract lifts up everyone and sets a new standard for dignity at work." Over the course of the next few days, a whole swath of state and Philadelphia Democratic politicians and various union bureaucrats tweeted their support for the poverty-level contract.

In its whole conduct of the strike, including twice endorsing destitution contracts, the AFT played the same strikebreaking role it does in every teachers' strike. Striking Temple workers received no strike pay, just as the AFT paid nothing in strike benefits last year for any strike. Instead, the AFT devotes massive resources to electing Democrats. Last year, the AFT spent more than \$35 million on "political activities and lobbying." It reported more than \$150 million in assets. Weingarten "earns" nearly \$500,000 per year.

The lack of strike pay inevitably wore down enthusiasm for continuing the strike. Back on March 7, a striking worker told *Inside Higher Ed* that "a large portion of those who can't join the strike is because of financial security."

With the AFT's fists closed, TUGSA turned to donations from the public for a strike fund. These funds, however, were not used to pay strike benefits to all striking workers. TUGSA reports on its website that the strike funds were "used to provide food for strikers, supplies for picketing, and to pay legal fees."

A striking worker told the *World Socialist Web Site* that TUGSA had raised at least "\$100,000, possibly more" in direct donations to the strike fund. The worker reported that some funds were used to assist members who incurred massive health care bills when Temple cut off health care benefits to striking workers. With the strike over, however, TUGSA is keeping the balance of the funds to "grow the trade union" and not providing funds to the workers who went six weeks without a cent.

In meetings held by the TUGSA leadership to promote the

second tentative agreement, the striker reported,

They kept saying we only had 'one chance' to vote 'no' on a TA [in February] and return to the table for more bargaining. They said if we voted down this second TA it would constitute a 'no confidence' vote in the CNT [contract negotiating team] and that a new negotiations team would have to be selected. They were scaring people who had already missed a month of pay because they were on strike, playing on the fact that we weren't prepared to put another CNT forward.

There is no doubt Temple has more than sufficient funding to easily double salaries for graduate students. It has an endowment of almost \$875 million and, according to TUGSA, has made record profits since the onset of the pandemic, including \$238 million in 2022. Doubling salaries to \$38,000 for 750 graduate and teaching assistants would cost \$14,625,000, just over 6 per cent of Temple's 2022 net profits.

Lessons must be drawn from yet another sell-out agreement brokered by the unions. Workers, in whatever industry, must break free of the union apparatus' straitjacket. The unions, tied by a thousand strings to the Democratic Party and the state, do all they can to prevent struggles from breaking out. When finally forced to conduct a strike, they wear out worker militancy through limited or no strike pay, isolation from the broader working class, useless appeals to Democrats, and brokering poverty-level or below-inflation contracts, repeatedly, if necessary, until workers vote the right way.

Workers instead must form new organizations of struggle, entirely controlled by the rank-and-file. Such rank-and-file organizations will link up with those already formed, including at Caterpillar, auto parts supplier Dana, automakers Ford, General Motors and Stellantis, and among graduate student workers at the University of California, who formed such a committee in the midst of their strike earlier this year. This growing movement of workers in rebellion against the corporations, state and unions are part of a global organization, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact