

“We feel sold out”

Temple University graduate worker exposes lies about supposedly “historic” contract following six-week strike

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Temple University graduate workers continue to face poverty conditions after their struggle for living wages, family health care and other benefits was sold out at the hands of the Temple University Graduate Students Association (TUGSA) Local 6290 earlier this month.

On March 13, TUGSA proclaimed that several hundred striking graduate workers had ratified a contract by 344-8. A union spokesperson announced on Twitter that it was a “historic achievement for our union.” Since then, a coterie of state and local Democrats, as well as trade union officials, have showered Temple grad workers with false praise for their supposedly stunning victory.

In fact, graduate workers would be receiving a top wage of \$27,000 a year by the year 2026—the current average annual wage is reportedly under \$20,000—leaving them deeply impoverished in a city where the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s (MIT) Living Wage Calculator estimates that a single, childless adult requires, at present, at least \$36,455 to maintain themselves yearly. At the current 6 percent rate of inflation, that MIT figure for surviving in Philadelphia rises to \$43,418 by 2026. The “high end” figure of \$27,000, touted as a great contract victory, would be less than one-third a living wage.

In addition, grad workers’ families would receive 25 percent health coverage rather than complete benefits for dependents, as TUGSA initially demanded.

One crucial aspect of the contract, downplayed by the union, is that workers will not recuperate lost pay for the strike.

In comments to the *World Socialist Web Site*, Temple

graduate workers have accused TUGSA leaders of resorting to, in the words of one, “creative-speak to mask the fact that people did lose significant income” during the strike and from the final settlement. “We feel sold out,” the worker added.

“Several colleagues of mine have done the math, it will take us four to five months to make up for the lost pay” that grad workers who had been out on strike from the beginning would incur. Temple graduates are paid monthly.

“During the time of the second tentative agreement’s ratification, TUGSA had more than \$100,000 in its strike fund,” the worker explained. TUGSA leaders have proclaimed their intention to use the fund to pay off legal fees and other administrative tasks.

“Laurie Robins [TUGSA’s director of organizing] was asked at a meeting if there was ‘any way to make us whole again’ after the strike. He has been very defensive of the strike fund and told us ‘we’re going to have to view it as lost wages.’ There is more than enough in the strike fund to help us out,” they said.

The worker noted that the first tentative agreement, which was roundly rejected in February due to its miserly pay offers, would have offered a higher signing bonus, which may have covered lost wages during the strike. “We decided to sacrifice on that for higher pay” overall, the worker explained.

The grad worker noted that “quite a few people” in TUGSA’s leadership were the beneficiaries of fellowships, entitling them to receive funds from Temple without “rendering services” at the university. This would allow them to focus on their research and

dissertation writing while at Temple.

The worker explained that this included the majority of the contract negotiations team. “They weren’t really risking anything by being out on strike,” the worker said. “Sure, some of them may feel that they are the only ones who have the time and resources to take on the job of organizing and leading, but something isn’t right.”

“Some of [TUGSA’s leadership] want to go into labor organizing as a career,” the worker added. “This would look good for them [to proclaim the strike a ‘victory’ on paper].”

As for the contract, the worker stated that “we feel the union leadership wanted to have dependent health care on the tentative agreement” to present it as a “win” for their negotiating team.

“It was something Temple had originally said that it wouldn’t agree to, so it looks good for the negotiators to say they got this. Don’t get me wrong, we benefit from having 25 percent health coverage, but this pales in comparison to what all of us really wanted, a living wage.”

The worker explained that Matt Ford, a member of the negotiating team, said at an informational meeting on the TA that negotiators from Temple even offered to drop the health care coverage issue just to focus on wages. “This implied that TUGSA could have gotten more money,” but didn’t.

The worker explained that while 25 percent dependent coverage was “an improvement” over the original, the meager coverage still left those with dependents “priced out” for more comprehensive health plans. “This is nothing to Temple,” said the grad worker of the health care concessions. “Especially because most people still won’t be able to afford it.”

Temple’s current health care plans cost nearly \$500 a month. Under the newest contract, that would be reduced to \$350 monthly out of pocket for graduates, a still exorbitant sum. Most graduate workers with dependents are compelled to use Medicaid, the government insurance program for the poor, a fact that will not be changed by the 25 percent contribution from the university.

This is significant because many graduate students, owing to the work obligations of the university, move very slowly through their programs of study in their 20s and 30s, the period when most young workers start

their families. It is not unusual for graduate students to require 10 years to earn a doctorate.

Explaining the fact that so many striking grads had accepted the clearly inadequate offer, the worker explained that “many of us felt coerced to vote ‘yes’ on this deal.”

The worker explained “At least six or seven other people that I know say that they felt coerced by the leadership to accept this deal, because the ratification was presented as being a vote of confidence in the CNT [contract negotiating team]. If we voted ‘no,’ they’d be removed from negotiations. Many were also scared of missing another month’s pay. There’s a sense that many of us just don’t want to be seen as agitators.”

The worker called the union “secretive” about its negotiation process. “Caucuses [stand-up meetings in which union members are briefed about the negotiations’ progress] were allowed up until the day before the TA was accepted,” they said. “We were given a ‘one sheet’ with the main things about the offer,” but that was all.

The Temple worker also spoke about the simmering anger toward TUGSA’s parent union, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).

“Temple was employing professor lawyers against graduate student negotiators,” they said. “We could have used a pro-union lawyer on our side to help us out.” The AFT, rather than provide strike pay from its fund, offered to provide TUGSA strikers with a no-interest loan.



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