

# The social and political issues raised in the strike by graduate employees at the University of Michigan

International Youth and Students for Social Equality at U-M  
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The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor fully supports the strike by graduate academic workers beginning today. We call for the mobilization of students, faculty, campus workers and the entire working class to support and expand the walkout.

This strike was called by the Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO) at UM, which is affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), after the university administration repeatedly rejected key demands during the negotiations for a new three-year contract that will begin on May 1. The strike authorization was passed overwhelmingly last Friday by 95 percent.

Central issues in the strike include the demands by graduate workers for a major increase in wages, improved living and working conditions, more health insurance coverage, better compensation for student parents, caps to class sizes and the ability of instructors to transition to online classes due to COVID-19 concerns.

The IYSSE rejects entirely the cynical argument of the university and its new President Santa Ono that the strike "would needlessly hurt undergraduate students," a comment coming from an individual who "earns" nearly \$1 million a year, financed with our tuition! Undergraduate students recognize the vital role graduate students play and denounce the efforts of the administration to pit undergraduate students against striking graduate workers.

While the strike is unfolding at U-M, the issues involved in this struggle extend far beyond the campus. The provocative attitude of the university administration does not arise simply out of the viciousness or parsimony

of a few administrators.

The most heated issue in the struggle is the soaring cost of living. Graduate students have already been struggling to pay for necessities like groceries and child care, while the counteroffer from the university is a contemptuous 5 percent raise for the Ann Arbor campus and even less for Flint and Dearborn. This means a significant real wage cut, given the current inflation rate.

But graduate students are not the only ones struggling within this cost-of-living crisis. There is an escalating wave of class battles in the US and internationally fueled by the impact of soaring inflation.

Last week, 65,000 public school workers and teachers in Los Angeles waged a three-day strike over staff shortages and low wages. In France, millions marched and protested against the pension cuts imposed by the French President Emmanuel Macron without even a vote in the parliament. In recent weeks, there have been massive strikes involving hundreds of thousands of workers in the UK, Germany, Sri Lanka and other countries.

The catastrophic conditions facing workers throughout the world are the product of a deliberate ruling class policy. While they claim that there is no money for wages or social programs, billions of dollars are immediately conjured up by the Biden administration and the Federal Reserve to bail out the rich and protect the wealth of financial investors and speculators.

Furthermore, the cost-of-living crisis is inextricably connected to the escalating war. Over the past year, unlimited resources have been funneled into the US-NATO war against Russia. The Putin government's reactionary invasion of Ukraine more than one year ago was instigated by the US, and it has been followed by a relentless escalation that risks nuclear war. At the beginning of the month, the White House announced a \$1

trillion military budget for 2024, which is primarily directed against China.

The money printing operations of the Fed do not create any new value. The vast expenditures on military operations are not pulled out of thin air. Who will pay for it?

The answer is the working class. The systematic attacks on wages and living standards is the necessary corollary of the ruling class's policy of financial speculation and war, orchestrated by both the Republican and the Democratic parties.

The administration at U-M is itself deeply connected to the Democratic Party, the state and the ruling class. As with many universities, it is also developing evermore close relations with the US war machine. In February, U-M hosted an event featuring Alexander Vindman, one of the most fervent advocates for the expansion of the war against Russia.

As for the union apparatus, including the AFT, it exists for the purpose of suppressing the class struggle and imposing concessions contracts.

Graduate students at U-M have already had the experience of the 2020 strike, which was centered on the unsafe reopening of schools during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The AFT intervened after students overwhelmingly voted down a first proposal from the university that failed to address any of the key demands. It moved to quickly shut down the strike a few days later by ramming through another proposal that was virtually the same as the previous one. It was the same AFT that isolated and strangled the recent six-week strike at Temple University as well.

The AFT will employ similar tactics to strangle the current strike. In fact, the GEO has made clear that in the event that the university withholds pay, striking workers will not receive strike pay and the most promising "assistance" they will receive is an interest-free loan from the AFT. Likewise, the union is making no effort to mobilize broader sections of the working class, including workers in other affiliated unions on campus.

The trade union apparatus is an appendage of the corporations. Workers have a long experience with how it functions to oppose their interests. Those forces on campus who promote the apparatus, including in the Democratic Socialists of America, a faction of the Democratic Party, are on the lookout for positions within the apparatus itself.

Students and young people need to take a hard look at the society in which we live. The fight against

exploitation and inequality, against war and dictatorship, against environmental degradation and the ongoing pandemic is a fight against capitalism and for socialism.

The orientation must not be to the Democratic Party or any faction of the ruling class but to the international working class.

Within academia, and certainly at the University of Michigan, a great deal of energy has been devoted to arguing against the centrality of class conflict. The basic truth of Marxism, that the history of mankind is the history of class struggle, was supposedly superseded by conflicts centered on race, gender and other identities. Even the notion of objective truth was denied in the post-modernist attack on "metanarratives." The conception that the problems of mankind could only be resolved through the revolutionary mobilization of the working class against the capitalist system was to be relegated to a distant past.

Reality is refuting these conceptions. The working class is entering into struggle throughout the world. This is the powerful social force, the most powerful on the planet, that must be organized and mobilized on the basis of the fight for socialism.

Facing the enormous challenges of the present, young people must turn to and learn the lessons of the past. It is necessary to study the real history of the socialist movement, which is the history of the Trotskyist movement.

We urge all students committed to this fight to make the decision to join the IYSSE, the student and youth movement of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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