

University of Michigan graduate student workers strike for living wage

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Graduate student academic workers at the Ann Arbor campus of the University of Michigan walked out of their classes at 10:24 Wednesday morning, initiating an indefinite strike against the university over wages and other issues. The strike was called by the Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO) at U-M, an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).

The GEO has been in negotiations with the university since November to reach agreement on a three-year contract that would go into effect May 1 with the termination of the current contract. In response to the university's intransigence in the negotiations, over 1,000 of the approximately 1,300 graduate students at the university participated in a vote last Friday to authorize the strike, which was approved by 95 percent.

Members of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality at University of Michigan and reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* attended the walkout on Wednesday, spoke to dozens of students, and handed out hundreds copies of a statement published by the IYSSE-UM supporting the strike and calling for it to be broadened.

Graduate students receive near-poverty wages for an individual, but many students also support families. As one international student explained, "Grad workers are struggling to even meet their needs in terms of their basic food, rent and medical. With our wages, it's impossible to meet your sort of basic necessities."

Another student, Deena, said, "The conditions of life are horrible. I live off of campus, and I cannot afford enough to eat. I have to move frequently. \$24,000 a year is not enough to live off of. I am here to support the strike. There is money to fight for workers, but the university does not want to pay it forward."

Currently, the university pays graduate student workers around \$24,000 per year for working in the fall and spring semesters, and they receive no pay in the summer. The graduate students are demanding roughly \$38,000 per year.

"We've looked at the numbers," said Anna, a graduate student instructor (GSI) in ecology. "According to the MIT

Living Wage Calculator, \$38,000 is the living wage in Ann Arbor." To be precise, the MIT calculator reports \$38,838 as the living wage in Ann Arbor.

For its part, the university has been adamant about its offer of a 5 percent raise for next year and an 11.5 percent total raise over the next three years. "5 percent is what they vaguely believe sounds acceptable," said Anna. "They're just playing a bargaining game." With inflation currently at 6 percent, the graduate students are in fact being offered a significant reduction in real wages.

Other major issues in the strike include improved living and working conditions, more health insurance coverage, better compensation for student parents, caps to class sizes and the right of instructors to transition to online classes due to COVID-19 concerns.

The strike began Wednesday with a rally and a march to the office building of the university's new president, Santa Ono, where the students chanted, "5 percent won't pay the rent!" Ono, who has been contemptuous of the strike, is paid nearly \$1 million per year, as more than one speaker at the rally pointed out. To put this in perspective, the university could pay every graduate student academic worker another \$14,000 for \$18 million. The school's operating budget is \$10.3 billion.

The plea by the university is that there is no money for the kind of raise the graduate students are demanding. This is a lie. The University of Michigan is one of the wealthiest universities in the US.

As one international student at the rally observed of U-M:

They're saying there's no money. They are making millions. They stated it themselves, you know, we're not making these numbers up. We went to the recent meetings. They have their financial advisers come and do a presentation where they said that they're making more money than any other major institution right now. So if they have the money, then pay us fairly. . .

It's [the university] generating surplus every year through the labor of all the grad workers and faculty, like everybody here.

Most of the graduate students that spoke on Wednesday were highly aware that they are the victims of capitalist exploitation. As another international student said, "Universities are functioning like corporations."

They don't count research as labor, and they take ownership of our research. They use international students as the model for low wages and exploitation. They've created captive labor with us.

U-M's Board of Regents is dominated by Democratic Party functionaries and activists, such as attorney Mark Bernstein and pizza magnate Denise Illitch. As such, U-M is operated in the interests of corporate capitalism, the military and Democratic Party politics.

Also on Wednesday, the university kept its promise to file an unfair labor practice charge against GEO for violating its contract, which does not expire until May 1. Michigan state law makes it unlawful for public employees to strike.

The complaint exploits the university's legal advantage since postponing the strike until May 1, after classes and exams have ended, would render it pointless. The university's legal complaint invokes an unjust and anti-worker law that seeks to render state workers helpless against the will of their employers. The university obtained a similar injunction to end the 2020 strike, to which the GEO, under the tutelage of the AFT, quickly surrendered.

Recalling 2020, GSI Curt commented on the university's tactics:

I remember that the injunction seemed like a brutal tactic. Basically a corporation intimidating its workers rather than an institution investing in its future (since we represent Michigan when we leave). It's really disappointing to see it being threatened again.

Many graduate students at Michigan were on the campus for the 2020 strike and must draw conclusions from that experience. As they are doing in the current strike, GEO leaders again use fiery rhetoric but provide no strike pay if the university withholds pay, nor do they propose any

strategy for broadening the strike.

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the parent union of the GEO, currently has over \$92 million in their general fund and over \$7.6 million specifically earmarked for its "Militancy/Defense Fund." Instead of supporting the strike with these funds, graduate student workers are being told they might be able to receive an interest-free loan from the AFT.

The GEO leadership also openly aligns itself on the campus with the Young Democratic Socialists of America (YDSA). The YDSA, like the AFT, is an organization firmly entrenched within the territory of the Democratic Party. Their primary function is the same as that of the teacher's union, to channel opposition behind the Democratic Party. In fact, leading members of the DSA helped pass and justify the anti-strike law against hundreds of thousands of railroad workers in November 2022.

The graduate student workers of the University of Michigan, like graduate student workers around the country and internationally, must orient themselves toward the working class, the truly progressive force in the world. Their struggle is echoed in the mass strikes and protests taking place in France, Germany, the UK, Sri Lanka, Israel and elsewhere.

Many students that the WSWs/IYSSE team spoke to very vocally identified their own struggles with the current mass strikes and opposition exploding among workers and students in France. There was also a strong opposition to the reckless US-NATO war escalation against Russia in Ukraine, and the implication that there is no money for education and student workers but billions for criminal and unpopular wars. There was a consistent sense among students that the strike was connected to economic and social crisis everywhere.

As Curt observed, "Moving forward is hard. Receiving wages that get close to cost of living will help in the short term. All the fundamental problems of exploitation under capitalism...still remain."



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