University of Michigan grad students remain defiant as university seeks injunction against strike

Our reporters
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Graduate student workers at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor continued their campus-wide strike Friday. The students are demanding, among other changes, a 60 percent pay increase to lift them out of their near-poverty conditions. The grad students and their supporters braved cold and rain on their third day on the picket line.

The University of Michigan is one of the wealthiest universities in the country, with peak revenue in 2021 of $8 billion, according to the website Zippia, or $228,571 per employee. Although it carries not-for-profit status, U-M is, in effect, a large corporation—a revenue-maximizing, cost-cutting concern that pays its executives very well (new President Santa Ono earns close to $1 million), allocates multimillion-dollar contracts and holds down labor costs.

As he had threatened he would, Ono on Wednesday filed a request for an injunction to end the strike with the Michigan Labor Relations Board. The grounds for the suit are based on a reactionary Michigan state law that outlaws strikes by public employees, and on the fact that the grad students' current contract does not expire until May 1.

The threat of a court injunction sparked outrage among the student body. One law student told the WSWS, "We should all walk out and support the strike regardless of what the law says."

Dominique, a first-year grad student who is not an instructor involved in the strike, added, "I support the teachers. It is disturbing to see the university take a heavy-fist approach to the instructors by pursuing a legal injunction. How can someone live on this sort of pay?"

Support among faculty members is also strong. One English Department lecturer said: "I support the strike. $24,000 per year in Ann Arbor is nowhere near a living wage. And the graduate instructors have very limited medical and child care. There is no way they should be getting threatening letters from university officials making $600,000 per year."

The lecturer referred to a letter sent by Provost Laurie K. McCauley to the campus community on Tuesday, March 28. Regarding that letter's provocative reference to the "safety" of students near the picket lines, the lecturer asked, "Where was the administration's concern for safety when instructors asked for masks and safer conditions in the classroom when the university re-opened in 2020?"

Ryan, an undergraduate biology major, echoed the lecturer's remarks. "The GSI pay is way too low. A 5 percent increase is nowhere near sufficient and should not be taken up in negotiations. It is necessary to ask for much more than that to deal with inflation."

Individuals from the Young Democratic Socialists of America, who are in control of the GEO leadership, tried to interrupt and prevent pickets from speaking with WSWS campaigners Friday afternoon.

Last December, three DSA members in the House of Representatives voted to block strike action by 120,000 railroaders. The DSA was also centrally involved in the shutdown of the last GEO strike at the University of Michigan in 2020, cynically professing concern for the impact of the walkout on minority students to justify a deal that ended remote work during the pandemic. Now, the DSA is also hailing as a "historic victory" a contract for Los Angeles public school support staff that would only raise wages to $33,000.

A critical issue facing strikers is to assert democratic

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control over their struggle, to prevent it from being sold out by the union bureaucracy. This is what took place in last month's graduate student strike at Temple University, which the union shut down with a contract with annual wages more than $8,000 below even what the union itself considered a "living wage."

This is what the DSA opposes. It declares that the suggestion that the rank and file, rather than union bureaucrats, should control the conduct of the strike is tantamount to being "anti-union."

The WSWS and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), on the other hand, call for graduate students to form a rank-and-file strike committee and turn outward to their real allies, the working class throughout Michigan and the world.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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