

Facing strikebreaking by Democratic-led UM regents, grad student instructors rally for a living wage

Our reporters
3 April 2023

We want to hear from you: Fill out the form below to tell us what you think about the grad student instructors' strike, the strikebreaking threats of the university, and the conditions facing students and campus workers.

Graduate students, faculty members and undergraduates gathered on the University of Michigan—Ann Arbor campus Monday morning to express their support for UM's grad student academic workers, who entered the sixth day of a strike for a living wage. While the rally was taking place, teams of strikers picketed at building entrances across the campus.

The university administration, whose Board of Regents is dominated by the Democratic Party, is refusing to discuss the demand of the Graduate Employees' Organization for a 60 percent wage increase in the first year of a three-year contract, which would bring their poverty-level annual income up to what is considered a minimum living wage. Instead, the university has filed two lawsuits, one to secure a back-to-work injunction and the other to fine the union for calling a strike before the May 1 expiration of the current contract. A local judge will hear the lawsuits on Tuesday.

The university is also threatening to withhold the pay of all grad student instructors who refuse to return to work. Despite these vicious tactics, the 1,300 striking grad students remain defiant and determined to continue their fight.

Their strike is endangered, however, by the refusal of the union leadership to advance a strategy to break the isolation of the strike and mobilize the powerful support that exists among workers both on and off the campus as well as among students. While the workers are locked in a political as well as economic struggle against the university and the Democratic Party-controlled Board of Regents, the parent union of the GEO, the American

Federation of Teachers (AFT), is allied with the Biden administration and the Democrats and fully supports the escalating war against Russia in Ukraine, which is consuming hundreds of billions of tax-payer dollars and risking a catastrophic nuclear war.

This is combined with a new round of massive bank bailouts. Both the war against Russia and war preparations against China and the trillions being allocated to rescue the financial oligarchy are to be paid for at the expense of the living standards, working conditions and democratic rights of the working class in the US and internationally.

The GEO itself is largely controlled by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), an arm of the Democratic Party and the trade union bureaucracy that has nothing to do with socialism and is hostile to the mobilization of the power of the working class.

Three years ago, the GEO leadership, including some of the same DSA members who are directing the current strike, called off a strike against unsafe conditions at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and pushed through a sellout contract.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to grad student strikers and supporters at Monday's rally.

"The gap between a living wage and what we make is so big," said Claudio, a striking grad student in Romance languages. "We make a lot of profit for this university, \$200 million. Many international students are in poverty situations here, going to food pantries, taking food stamps, selling plasma.

"Many of us have families. I'm a parent of two children, but we're not entitled to the child care subsidy because my wife is an international student." One of the grad students' demands is an international student emergency fund.

Speaking of the betrayal of the 2020 strike, Claudio, who was on campus at that time, said, “The union leadership just decided to stop. I think it was a political decision.”

The university pays graduate student instructors (GSI) and graduate student staff assistants (GSSA) a stipend of \$24,000 in addition to a tuition waiver. The waiver-plus-stipend model is standard for grad student workers throughout the US.

“I support the strike,” said one undergraduate student after the rally. “There’s no way you can live on \$24,000 a year right now in Ann Arbor.”

Marie, a first-generation US citizen from Jamaica and GSI, stressed that “it is very expensive to live in Ann Arbor. I had no idea when I was offered the GSI position what \$24,000 really meant.”

The graduate students are demanding a 60 percent raise from the university for a “baseline living wage” of \$38,500 per year. The number is drawn from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Living Wage Calculator, which currently reports that \$38,800 per year is the minimum living wage in Ann Arbor.

The university is offering an insulting 11.5 percent wage increase over three years—a substantial further cut in real wages under conditions of a 6 percent annual inflation rate.

Bethany, a GSI studying history, made the point that “if grad students are not given a living wage, only the rich will be able to become grad students. That would not be a good situation.” This observation was echoed by another student, Katherine.

When Katherine graduates in a few weeks with a law degree, she will leave UM with a debt of \$150,000. “Going to school full-time and working 20 hours a week, I earn \$12,000 over the course of half a year. It is not possible to live on that. Many of us have to work a second job, or, as in my case, take out student loans. Unless you have access to independent wealth, it is impossible to get a graduate degree. That is wrong.”

The AFT, which claims assets of nearly \$100 million, provides no strike pay. Under the leadership of millionaire President Randi Weingarten, it was responsible for stifling a nationwide wave of teachers’ strikes in 2018 and a series of strikes against deadly conditions in the schools at the start of the pandemic in 2020.

An operative of the Democratic Party, Weingarten traveled to Ukraine last October in support of US imperialism’s proxy war against Russia. DSA members in the US Congress, the so-called “progressive”

Democrats, have voted repeatedly to fund the war. Three of them voted in December to enforce Biden’s ban on a strike by 110,000 rail workers and the imposition of a pro-company contract that had been rejected by rank-and-file workers.

GEO and Young Democratic Socialists of America (YDSA) speakers at the rally and ensuing march down State Street shouted “solidarity,” but made no call for the equally exploited members of the AFT-affiliated Lecturers’ Employee Organization (LEO) or physician assistants and diagnostic technicians at Michigan Medicine to be called out to defeat the strikebreaking and win the grad students’ demands.

On Monday, YDSA member Nat Leach, a regular speaker at strike rallies, interrupted a conversation between a student and a WSWS reporter to slander the WSWS for “support[ing] sexual assault,” a dishonest reference to the website’s critical stance toward the #MeToo movement. Denouncing the reporter, Leach said, “You probably support ‘innocent until proven guilty.’” Taken aback, the reporter asked for clarification. Was Leach saying that she did not support the legal principle of a defendant being presumed innocent until proven guilty? She responded, “No, I don’t.”

The WSWS and the UM International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) urge grad workers to form a rank-and-file strike committee independent of the GEO and AFT leadership to take control of the strike, fight to extend it and raise the need for an independent political struggle against both parties of big business, austerity and war, as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). This must be part of the building of a global movement against war based on the working class and the fight for socialism.



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