

University of Michigan graduate student strike continues after judge denies injunction

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4 April 2023

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

On Tuesday, Washtenaw County Circuit Court Judge Carol Kuhnke denied a request by the University of Michigan to issue a preliminary injunction against the strike by roughly 1,300 graduate student workers represented by the Graduate Employees Organization (GEO) Local 3550. As a result, the open-ended strike, which began on March 28, is continuing into its second week.

This denial of a preliminary injunction is by no means a victory for the striking graduate students, who should place no faith in the bourgeois legal system. Judge Kuhnke stated, “I don’t agree that the university has yet demonstrated irreparable harm. I will give the university the opportunity to do that by way of an evidentiary hearing.” The next hearing is scheduled for Monday, April 10, at which point an injunction may be issued.

Last September, Judge Kuhnke denied a similar injunction request by Eastern Michigan University against striking faculty members represented by the American Association of University Professors (EMU-AAUP). Just days later, the union negotiated a sellout contract that imposed sub-inflation wage increases, inadequate protections against COVID-19, increased health care costs and more.

In September 2020, University of Michigan graduate students waged a powerful strike against the unsafe reopening of campus in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. The university responded similarly by filing for a preliminary injunction. However, before this was brought to court, the GEO’s parent union, the

American Federation of Teachers (AFT), negotiated and rammed through a deal almost exactly the same as one that strikers had overwhelmingly rejected the week prior. This allowed the campus to fully reopen, causing thousands of COVID-19 infections and untold suffering from Long COVID in the student body as a whole.

The university is seeking to utilize Michigan’s reactionary Public Employment Relations Act (PERA) of 1947, which made strikes by public employees illegal. It is acting ruthlessly to break the strike, including through the withholding of pay and the deployment of campus police in the event that an injunction is issued.

At the same time, the GEO and AFT refuse to provide workers with strike pay, instead offering an insulting “interest-free loan.” The AFT, whose multimillionaire President Randi Weingarten has kept silent on the strike, is isolating the graduate students from other workers, including multiple AFT-affiliated bargaining units on the same campus.

Prior to Tuesday’s court hearing, the GEO held a march through campus and rally outside the courthouse, which drew roughly 200 participants. *World Socialist Web Site* reporters spoke with striking graduate students and their supporters outside the courtroom and on picket lines Tuesday, distributing a statement from the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at UM.

Miles, a striking graduate student in the architecture department, who attended Tuesday’s court hearing, told the WSW, “I think that the university has not proven irreparable harm, and they have the ability to end the strike whenever they want to by agreeing to GEO’s demands.” The union is demanding a 60 percent wage increase in the first year of a three-year contract. That would raise the average graduate student

worker's salary from roughly \$24,000 to \$38,000 per year.

Miles added, "They have also proven that they have the capacity to meet those demands," noting that Rackham Graduate School, through which the striking graduate students are enrolled, "announced last week that they could pay all PhD students \$36,000." He stated, "At the bargaining table, they've refused to discuss that plan from the Rackham Graduate School. HR [Human Resources] has refused to discuss it."

Miles went on to say, "The choice of the university to continue to refuse to meet GEO demands demonstrates that they value profit over the possibility of the \$36,000 salary, which they're more than able to give us."

Asked about the broader international context of the strike and the unfolding wave of class struggles in France, Germany, Israel and many other countries, Miles stated, "Marx believed in the international proletariat and the international working class. I think one of the tragedies of World War I and World War II is that these were wars that pitted the working classes of Germany, France, Russia, Britain, all against each other, when they have commonalities and common needs."

He concluded, "This is a global movement for labor and it will be won as a global movement."

The WWSWS also spoke with David, a lecturer in international studies who is supporting his colleagues in their strike. Commenting on the evidentiary hearing scheduled for Monday, David stated, "I don't think the university has the evidence. It would be a big blow for them if they do not get the ruling they want on Monday, and I hope that happens, because they're being stubborn as hell."

Lecturers are not represented by the GEO, but David attended the picket in solidarity with striking graduate students. Like the GEO, the Lecturers' Employee Organization (LEO) Local 6244 is affiliated with the AFT. David stated, "I'm a lecturer, so I'm here supporting them, but I haven't gotten a lot of direction from the AFT."

WWSWS reporters noted that the University of Michigan strike is just the latest in a wave of graduate workers' struggles in recent years, including at the University of California, Eastern Michigan University, Temple University, New York University, Columbia University, The New School, the University of Illinois

at Chicago, and other campuses. On Monday, a strike by faculty members and academic support professionals began at Chicago State University, with strikes likely to follow in the coming week at Eastern Illinois University and Governors State University.

Commenting on the UC graduate workers' strike, David said, "My understanding is that graduate students in California are really pushing for COLA [cost-of-living adjustment]. That's something I think we're going to try to put in for the LEO contract coming up. The GEO strike is really, if anything, the canary in the coalmine. We're seeing how much the administration and the incoming president are pushing back. We have to get prepared for that ourselves, because we're up for contract negotiations next year."

Classes are set to end on April 18 at the University of Michigan, with finals taking place April 20-27. To advance their struggle, it is critical that striking graduate students build a rank-and-file strike committee independent of the GEO and AFT leadership to assert truly democratic control over negotiations and the contract voting process. This committee must make every effort to mobilize the immense support for their struggle that exists in the student body, among campus workers and among other sections of the working class in the surrounding region.

This strike raises fundamental political and social issues, including the domination of campuses by the capitalist Democratic Party, the integration of academia with the military-industrial complex, the attendant militarization of campus police forces, the denigration and impoverishment of intellectual laborers, rampant inequality and more.

All of these burning social questions can only be resolved through a far broader struggle connected to the international class struggle and the fight for world socialism. This is the perspective of the IYSSE. We urge all striking graduate students to fill out the form below to discuss these issues and the way forward.



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