

University of Michigan graduate students' strike at a critical turning point

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The ongoing strike by over 1,300 graduate student workers at the University of Michigan is reaching a critical turning point. While rank-and-file graduate students have demonstrated courage in fighting to win their central demands—above all, a living wage amid skyrocketing inflation—it is clear that the Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) leadership are preparing to betray the strike.

At an all-membership union meeting on Wednesday night attended by roughly 600 graduate students, rank-and-file members were presented with a series of motions by the GEO and AFT leadership that made clear their intention to abandon previous demands and quickly impose a sellout agreement.

Most revealing among the items presented to the membership on Wednesday was a fundamental revision of the most central demand for a 60 percent wage increase over the first year of the three-year contract. This increase would ensure that every graduate student worker receives a \$38,000 salary in accordance with MIT's Living Wage Calculator. At present, most graduate students earn a poverty-level wage of \$24,000 over the course of an eight-month academic year, often with no ability to work over the summer.

On Wednesday, the GEO suddenly introduced a second alternative to this demand—what they termed a “supposal” to be informally introduced at Thursday's bargaining session—in which graduate students would instead get a 7 percent monthly increase in the first academic year and a summer “bonus” option, which they claim would still supposedly get student workers to \$38,000.

Everything about the proposal is deliberately open-ended and unclear. There is no wording about guaranteed summer work nor why it is a “bonus” and not just part of the salary. Most concerning is whether graduate workers would be expected to take on 12 months of work for the same wage,

instead of the previous demand for a 60 percent increase to their 8- to 9-month contract.

After floating this “supposal” at Thursday's bargaining, it is likely that the GEO and AFT bargaining representatives will present a formal proposal along these lines to the University during their full-day, closed-door negotiations session on Friday.

Flowing from this revision of the strikers' central demand, the union leadership presented another motion pertaining to how they can bring about an end to the strike. The motion resolved to “Extend the strike until we get real movement from HR [Human Resources] *OR* we are enjoined, at which point we will decide what to do.”

Critical in this motion is the formulation “get real movement” instead of “get our demands.” This vague wording opens the door to accepting any “movement” whatsoever on the part of the University.

The graduate students are striking in advance of the expiration of their contract on May 1, and the university has responded aggressively, filing a lawsuit seeking an injunction against the workers. So far, this preliminary injunction has failed, with Washtenaw County Circuit Court Judge Carol Kuhnke ruling in the graduate students' favor earlier this week. On Monday, however, Judge Kuhnke is giving the university a second chance to prove “irreparable harm” at an evidentiary hearing, at which point an injunction may be issued.

Explaining Wednesday's motion on what could bring an end to the strike, the GEO leadership told the rank and file that they faced three options in the event of an injunction: the union can comply and end the strike; the union leadership can call to end the strike while members continue striking on an unofficial basis, effectively a wildcat strike; or the union can ignore the injunction and wage an illegal strike.

With final exams approaching in mid-April, the university is pressuring lecturers (represented by the AFT-affiliated Lecturers Employee Organization) and tenured faculty into scabbing to cover the work lost to striking graduate students.

They are also giving “attestation” forms to graduate students as another pressure tactic. Graduate workers who indicate that they are teaching during the strike will continue to be paid, while those on strike will have their pay docked.

The GEO-AFT leadership is escalating its efforts to lower expectations, while continuing to isolate the strikers and prevent any action to broaden the strike and win the critical demands of the graduate student workers. From the beginning, the union leadership has designed the strike to fail and wear down rank-and-file workers.

A third topic of discussion at Wednesday’s union meeting, the status of the GEO-AFT “Hardship Fund,” confirms this assessment. As has become standard among unionized workers’ struggles in recent years, the striking graduate students are receiving no strike pay from the GEO or AFT. Instead, the GEO is forcing members to prove their “hardship” in order to determine which of the 1,300 members will be granted money from the \$70,000 strike fund. Divided evenly, each member would receive just \$54.

By definition, all of the graduate strikers are already in “hardship” since they make a poverty wage. With the university stopping their pay, they face destitution.

The AFT, which has \$55 million in net assets, refuses to provide striking workers with full pay for the duration of the strike. Instead, they have only provided the insulting offer to cover the interest on loans that strikers take out to survive on the picket lines. If they secure one, the interest must be paid back to the AFT within a year!

If the strike were to extend throughout the month of April, during which time a graduate student would stand to lose approximately \$2,300 worth of pay, a loan, as well as any future interest owed to the AFT, would instantly wipe out whatever initial monthly salary they would make in a new contract.

Regarding the threat of university retaliation against strikers, including possible firing, the GEO once again offered empty reassurances, including the false claim that the university will not actually stop paying them. This is despite the fact that the University has begun circulating attestation forms and states explicitly on their Public Affairs website that they have “[I]nformed the union that the university will withhold the pay of any GSIs/GSSAs who do not work during the strike.”

Nothing was raised in Wednesday’s meeting about why the GEO is not seeking to combine with other sections of workers and students, most notably the highly exploited lecturers, who are also affiliated with the AFT.

Lecturers are adjunct faculty, non-tenure track professors, and often teach undergraduate courses. They have demonstrated broad sympathy for the strike, including manning picket lines alongside their colleagues but are

under enormous pressure to bend to the university’s demands. Under an AFT-negotiated contract, the LEO is not permitted to wage a sympathy strike.

Above all, nothing is being said about the fact that the strike is a political fight against the government and the Democratic Party, which controls the state and dominates the Board of Regents at the University of Michigan. For its part, the AFT national leadership functions as an appendage of the Democratic Party and has primarily served to oversee cuts to wages and benefits, while ensuring that strikes and growing opposition among educators do not escape their control or take an independent and international direction against the capitalist political parties.

AFT President Randi Weingarten, who accrued a salary of \$449,562 in 2021 and is a multi-millionaire, is on the Democratic National Committee. She has thus far said nothing significant about the GEO strike beyond issuing a perfunctory tweet that acknowledged its existence.

To ensure that their struggle is not betrayed, it is critical that striking graduate students establish a rank-and-file strike committee, independent of the GEO-AFT leadership. This committee must fight for full transparency, including the live-streaming of all negotiations with the University, and assert genuine democratic control over any voting process on a tentative agreement.

Most importantly, such a committee must fight to win the broadest possible support among students, lecturers and other workers across the University of Michigan campus, while turning out to other sections of the working class in the surrounding Detroit metropolitan region. Only through a broadening of their struggle, which is in fact part of a global upsurge of working class struggles, can striking graduate students achieve their demands and more.



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