

Lessons of the Temple University strike

International Youth and Students for Social Equality
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The six-week long strike by hundreds of graduate student workers and teaching assistants at Temple University (TU) in Philadelphia, which ended March 13, contains many lessons for academic workers, including the 1,200 grad students currently on strike at the University of Michigan.

Temple graduate workers were isolated and left to fight alone by their parent union, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). They braved vicious corporate-style threats from the university, walked the picket lines for weeks, voted down a first sellout agreement almost unanimously, and demonstrated that there exists widespread support for their struggle in the working class and among the student youth.

A parade of union bureaucrats and Democratic Party politicians proclaimed the deal to end the strike as a “victory,” a “fair contract,” and “a historic achievement.” As usual, the Democrats and union bureaucrats were tail-ended by the pseudo-left, with the publications *Left Voice* and *Workers Voice* hailing the outcome as “important victories,” a “big win,” and a “victory that offers positive lessons about how to win strikes through determination.”

Yet, it is the most basic duty of socialists to tell the truth to the working class: The contract that brought the strike to an end is a defeat.

This reality is made clear based even on the initial demands of the leadership of the Temple University Graduate Students’ Association (TUGSA), AFT Local 6290. The strike began with the demand for a \$32,800 minimum annual salary, then characterized by TUGSA as a “living wage.” Graduate workers, according to the new contract, will now max out at \$27,000 by 2026, almost \$6,000 less than what TUGSA formerly insisted is required to live in Philadelphia this year. In fact, the real amount needed to live in the city is far higher.

In addition, the contract secured a miserly 25 percent contribution for dependent care by the University. This will not change the fact that many graduate workers with families will likely have to rely on Medicaid, the federal health insurance program for the poor.

To add insult to injury, graduate workers told the WSWs that they will receive no pay for strike days. During the strike, *the AFT offered not one penny* to the strikers from its massive, and never-touched “strike fund.” Even charitable contributions raised in the community went to union coffers, with only limited assistance provided for striking workers’ health care costs.

Watching the unpaid bills pile up and facing the vindictive imposition of tuition payments by the university, as well as the prospect of the strike’s dissipation over spring break, graduate workers ratified a contract hustled before them in dubious

circumstances. The TUGSA negotiating team proclaimed the deal to be a great victory even before the ink had dried.

Less than half the bargaining unit voted, almost all in favor of the settlement. These workers saw no other way forward, given the conduct of the strike by TUGSA and the AFT, as well as threats by the university administration to bankrupt them by cutting them off of health care and tuition support.

The Temple strike shows that, in spite of ceaseless attempts on the campuses to promote race and identity as fundamental categories in society, the real basic division is class.

Graduate workers labor at the universities, the very fountainheads of bourgeois ideology. For decades, the social sciences and humanities departments have propagated a series of myths, associated with postmodernism and identity politics, designed to inoculate young intellectuals against socialism: that the “meta-narrative” of the class struggle is dead; that “discourse” dominates material reality; that gender, race, and sexuality are the decisive “categories” of society, and so on.

The global upsurge of mass strikes and protests, however, demonstrates the material reality of the international class struggle, from which the fight at Temple cannot be separated. This was not just a contract fight, as the AFT and TUGSA wished to portray it.

It is of decisive importance that graduate students defy the essentially pro-capitalist ideology of the universities, and take up the study of Marxism and of history. Only within that framework can the question even properly be posed: *What are the real lessons of the Temple strike?*

Two paths presented themselves to the Temple graduate workers. The path chosen by the TUGSA leadership—no doubt imposed from above by AFT President Randi Weingarten and the AFT bureaucracy—was based on isolating the struggle and appealing to the Democratic Party.

At strike rallies, the microphone was handed over to Democratic Party politicians. At a critical juncture in the strike, the TUGSA union even organized a caravan to the state capital in Harrisburg, absurdly appealing to capitalist politicians to cut off funding to Temple unless it agreed to the “living wage” for graduate workers—the very “core demand” that the union wound up dropping in negotiations. This publicity stunt accomplished nothing, but it cannot have failed to alienate other workers at Temple, as well as undergraduates, all of whom depend on meager funding from the state.

The AFT, whose bureaucratic apparatus is in all but name a caucus within the Democratic Party, is an old hand at the dark art of subverting workers’ struggles. Every strike movement of educators that has erupted in the past decade—including the

teachers' revolts in West Virginia, Oklahoma, and Arizona in 2018—the AFT has diverted, defanged, and buried at the doorstep of its Democratic Party patrons. “Remember in November,”—that is, to channel opposition behind the election campaigns of Democrats who turn around and impose massive austerity—is the tired slogan of the AFT and the National Education Association (NEA).

Every election cycle, the teachers' unions, along with the rest of the AFL-CIO, send tens of millions of dollars to the Democratic Party, a capitalist party no less than the Republicans. The bitter fruit of this policy is everywhere visible in the crisis gripping the entire American educational system—a crisis that is then used as a rationale to blame educators and impose new cuts, and “best-we-can-get” austerity contracts such as the one at Temple.

But the Democratic Party is responsible for the very conditions driving graduate workers into struggle. It is one of the two major parties of American capitalism. It protects the fortunes of the ruling class, including those of the 18 billionaires who reside in Pennsylvania, while it imposes austerity budgets and interest rate hikes on workers.

The Biden administration is providing endless billions to prosecute the NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine and to prepare for world war against China, and limitless dollars for the banks and their wealthy investors. It is this ruling class policy of war and financial plunder that drive inflation, destroying the real value of wages not only at Temple but for the entire working class.

The role of the Democratic Party radiates down from the national government all the way to Temple, an institution that, in large measure, it runs. Temple's Board of Trustees is dominated by Democratic Party and trade union functionaries, in addition to very wealthy “liberal” figures from the corporate world. The governor's mansion in Pennsylvania is controlled by Democrats, as it has been for years, and the state legislature has long been split between Democrats and Republicans. In a very real sense, when TUGSA sent its delegation to Harrisburg, it was pleading, hat in hand, before its bosses.

The path chosen by TUGSA was a dead end. It could have only one result: the exhaustion of the graduate students and their ultimate capitulation before a rotten deal. This is exactly what took place. All that was left was to put forth the lie that it was a victory, the special role assigned by the bureaucracy to the pseudo-left.

There was another way forward. The allies of the graduate workers are not among the politicians of the Democratic Party or its “left” hangers-on. They are to be found in the other sections of the working class at Temple and beyond.

There was strong support for the Temple graduate workers, even an instinctive understanding among many that “their fight is our fight.” But the trade unions prevented the graduate workers from linking up with other workers—even among the AFT faculty local, whose members were compelled to cross TUGSA picket lines! Indeed, the pro-capitalist unions stand as a barrier to even the oldest a-b-c of the labor movement: an injury to one is an injury to all.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and Socialist Equality Party intervened in the Temple strike. We called for the formation of

rank-and-file committees to take the struggle out of the hands of the AFT, and the TUGSA bureaucrats-in-training who take orders from it.

This is not just a slogan. The need for the formation of rank-and-file committees arises *objectively* from the actually existing organization of the working class at the universities, and within the broader, crisis-ridden global capitalist system. Only a rank-and-file committee, free from the straitjacket of the union bureaucracy, could expand the strike to maintenance workers, secretarial staff and faculty, at Temple and beyond.

The way forward along the path of class struggle is being illuminated by the rank-and-file committee movement—in auto, rail, education, health care—initiated by the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, and also by the revolutionary potential seen in the mass working class struggles emerging in France, Israel, Sri Lanka, and elsewhere.

It is shown in the insurgent campaign for United Auto Workers (UAW) president of Will Lehman who works at the Mack Volvo plant near Allentown, Pennsylvania, an hour from Philadelphia. Significantly, Lehman visited Temple graduate workers on their picket lines, encouraging them to form a rank-and-file committee and to link up their struggle with auto workers.

There was immediate significance to Lehman's visit. The UAW “represents” more graduate workers than any other union. Last year, the UAW bureaucracy isolated and betrayed a massive strike of 48,000 University of California academic workers. It made certain that those graduate workers did not even know about the election for UAW president, and many did not even receive a ballot. This was done to exclude the membership from an election which was dominated by two factions of the pro-corporate bureaucracy. The new president, Shawn Fain, is a career official who won with a vote total equal to barely six percent of the total membership of the UAW.

But this fight is only at the beginning, not the end. Last Sunday, Lehman was joined by scores of autoworkers in a historic meeting of US autoworkers in Detroit, sponsored by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

Graduate workers cannot accept as a starting principle that “there is not enough money.” They cannot prosecute a struggle by pleading to the Democratic Party, and accepting their division from other sections of the workforce, even at the same university! It is to the real study of history, to the working class, and to the revival of its old socialist and militant traditions, that the graduate workers must turn.



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