

Court conclusively denies injunction against University of Michigan graduate student strike

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At a second court hearing Monday, Washtenaw County Circuit Court Judge Carol Kuhnke conclusively denied an injunction request that had been filed by the University of Michigan (U-M) in an attempt to stop the strike by 1,300 graduate students. The open-ended strike—which began on March 29 and centers on critical demands for a living wage, better health care and safer working conditions—will now continue.

Significantly, the injunction ruling came on the same day that over 9,000 faculty and graduate student workers initiated a powerful joint strike at Rutgers University, in response to the same social crisis and austerity that U-M grad students are struggling against. In addition, on Tuesday faculty and staff at Governor’s State University will begin strike action, the third strike among academic workers now taking place in Illinois.

While rank-and-file U-M graduate students have shown important courage in defying aggressive threats and strike-breaking maneuvers by the university, as well as daily attacks in the bourgeois press, they face urgent political challenges—above all, from their own union leadership.

Despite the ruling, there are several indications that the Graduate Employees Organization (GEO) union leaders, under the guidance of their parent union, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), are preparing to walk back their core demands and shut the strike down as swiftly as possible.

Immediately after the ruling, the GEO leadership was extremely conciliatory despite the courtroom victory. GEO President Jared Eno told the press, “We’ve really lacked a problem-solving relationship with the university at the bargaining table,” adding, “I hope that changes because we have a shared interest with the

university and making this campus a better place.”

Prior to the ruling, at an all-membership meeting last Wednesday, the GEO leadership indicated it would offer a second “supposal” contract at bargaining sessions which would be much more open-ended and unclear on the issue of the wage increase demand. Instead of a 60 percent increase to wages during the eight-month academic year—bringing grad students’ poverty-level salary of \$24,000 up to \$38,000—they would now try for a 7 percent increase with a “summer bonus.”

U-M grad students must recall the lessons of last September’s strike by 500 academic workers at Eastern Michigan University, represented by the American Association of University Professors (EMU-AAUP). After the same Judge Kuhnke denied a similar injunction request by the university against striking faculty members, within days the union leadership negotiated a sellout contract that imposed sub-inflation wage increases, increased health care costs and more.

In a speech to the GEO membership outside the courthouse, Contract Committee Chair Amir Fleischmann stated, “I can tell you that when we were preparing for today’s hearing ... we wrote two press releases. One if the injunction had been granted, and one if the decision had been postponed. We were not even prepared for the possibility of it being denied!”

This is a telling admission. A major reason the GEO leadership was not prepared for what to do in the event that the strike was allowed to legally continue is that they have been working mainly to limit its scope and tamp down expectations that their demands will be won. Key aspects of strengthening and broadening the strike have never even been seriously pursued by the

GEO-AFT leadership, let alone been permitted for broad discussion among the rank and file.

No strike pay was offered by the AFT from the outset. Instead, graduate students have been told to take out interest-free loans while facing destitution. It should be noted that the AFT sits on over \$55 million in dues reserves, of which at least \$6 million is allocated to their “defense” fund, none of which has gone to supporting the strike.

Above all, the GEO-AFT leaders have refused to raise the broader political issues bound up with this strike, which entails a direct confrontation with the Democratic Party and a fight against war, to which all social spending is now being directed. The AFT bureaucracy is fully integrated with the Democrats and their war machine, with the union’s multimillionaire President Randi Weingarten sitting on the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and regularly spouting pro-imperialist propaganda. Many GEO leaders are also connected with the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), a faction of the Democratic Party which fully supports US imperialism.

The lack of any serious strategy by the GEO-AFT leadership is lowering morale among the ranks of striking graduate students. There was a marked decline in attendance at Monday’s march and rally outside the courthouse, which drew no more than 40-50 people, down from roughly 200 at the prior week’s hearing.

Critically, the GEO-AFT leadership has never made any serious attempt to link up the strike with other sections of workers and students on campus. The AFT alone has three other unions representing thousands of workers at the University of Michigan, including the highly exploited lecturers in the Lecturers Employee Organization (LEO), the United Physician Assistants of Michigan Medicine (UPAMM) and the diagnostic technicians with the United Michigan Medicine Allied Professionals (UMMAP). UMMAP was formally recognized as an AFT union as recently as February 24 of this year.

Across the campus and throughout the surrounding region, there has been broad support for the strike. A team of *World Socialist Web Site* reporters campaigned on the GEO picket lines on Monday, speaking with students and attempting to distribute a statement of support from the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, “Mobilize educators and workers to

support striking University of Michigan graduate students!” The statement strongly backed the strike, while insisting that it be broadened and warning against its isolation by the AFT.

When WSWS campaigners attempted to distribute the statement to pickets outside of the courthouse, GEO leaders instructed strikers not to take the statements or even talk with the WSWS. As the strike has continued, GEO leaders have become increasingly hostile to permitting any discussion on the picket lines of a broader strategy.

When a WSWS reporter asked a GEO leader if they would be willing to give a statement of support to the Rutgers workers who had just initiated their strike, they stated contemptuously, “I don’t teach at Rutgers.”

The attempts by the union leadership to isolate the strike and suppress discussion among rank-and-file graduate student workers must be opposed. The fundamental political issues underlying this strike and the necessary international strategy that can lead the struggle to a successful conclusion, which only the WSWS and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) are raising and advancing, must be freely discussed and debated on the picket lines and at upcoming GEO all-membership meetings.



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