

Union drops core demand for 60 percent wage increase in University of Michigan strike

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As the strike by 1,300 graduate student workers at the University of Michigan (U-M) enters its fourth week, leaders of the Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO) have, without any democratic discussion, abandoned the strikers' core demand for a 60 percent wage increase and are preparing a sellout agreement.

On Friday, GEO's bargaining committee, working closely with their parent union, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), offered a formal bargaining proposal to the university which entirely omits the demand for a 60 percent wage increase, replacing it instead with a vague and open-ended "\$X." At a bargaining session Monday, GEO's lead negotiator Evelyn Smith clarified this by stating, "We didn't put numbers in there for a reason. We're interested in discussing the structure, then we can haggle over numbers."

The word "haggle" here is significant. For rank-and-file striking grad students, the numbers in the contract are existential. For the union negotiators, they are nothing more than bargaining chips for horse-trading. Talk of "haggling" over the demand for a living wage reflects the GEO-AFT leaders' cynicism and contempt for the rank and file.

The struggle at U-M is among a recent wave of strikes by academic workers fighting for a living wage, better health care coverage, improved working conditions and other demands. This includes a five-day strike by 9,000 students and faculty at Rutgers University that was betrayed this past Saturday, when union leaders shut down the strike before even reaching a tentative agreement, with no discussion or even a vote by rank-and-file members. This was done at the behest of the AFT, which is intimately connected to the Democratic Party.

What happened at Rutgers is a warning to the striking graduate students at U-M. Without a correct political orientation and the expansion of the strike among all students, faculty and staff, both on campus and beyond, their strike will be isolated and deliberately led to defeat by the GEO leadership, which is working closely with bureaucrats from the AFT. So long as these struggles are managed by the union bureaucracies, which are beholden to the Democratic

Party, they will end in isolation and defeat.

This was underscored on Monday, when state administrative law judge David Peltz of the Michigan Office of Administrative Hearings & Rules issued a ruling that the U-M strike violates the union's contract with the university. If upheld by the Michigan Employment Relations Commission (MERC), this strikebreaking measure will legalize the strike and allow the university to victimize striking graduate students. This underscores the fact that the U-M strike, waged against a university whose Board of Regents is dominated by the Democratic Party, pits graduate students directly against the Democratic-controlled government of Michigan.

The U-M strike began on March 29 after 95 percent of GEO members voted to authorize it, expressing the graduate students' overwhelming support for the key demand of a 60 percent wage increase. That increase would raise the average grad student's salary from \$24,000 to about \$38,000, bringing their wages up to the cost of living, according to the MIT Living Wage Calculator.

The demand for a living wage was met with bitter hostility from the university, which has regularly portrayed graduate workers as "selfish" and "unreasonable." While there were indications that some smaller agreements had been reached on other issues, such as insurance coverage and co-pays, the university insisted on offering only a sub-inflation 5 percent wage increase for next year, followed by a combined 6.5 percent in years two and three of the contract.

The GEO leadership first broached the question of a revamped compensation demand at an all-membership meeting on April 5. It suggested that the alternate plan, which it called a "supposal," would include a basic wage increase for year one of about 7 percent. However, the GEO leaders claimed, the wage increase would be tied to a new "bonus" for the four summer months when classes are not in session, increasing the total annual compensation to nearly 60 percent.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* warned at the time, this was really a maneuver aimed at disarming the rank-and-file

and preparing the way for ditching the 60 percent wage demand.

Ever since the alternate plan was introduced, graduate students have attempted to get clarification on its details at membership meetings. But the union leadership has refused to explain clearly what the so-called “summer bonus” would entail, even if it were accepted by the university. Would compensation for the four summer months be guaranteed to all GEO members at the wage rate stipulated in the contract? Or would it be dependent on funding decisions made by the university for the various departments?

If, as the union claims, the net result of the so-called “supposal” would be the same as a flat 60 percent wage increase, why would the university, which is adamantly opposed to granting a living wage, agree to it?

From the initial presentation to union members of the proposal to divide compensation between a basic wage and a summer bonus, to the GEO’s formal presentation of the plan to the university during last Friday’s contract talks, the entire process has been totally undemocratic.

At the general membership meeting on April 5, the GEO leadership said it had not worked out the exact language of the “supposal” and would need time to do so. No details were provided on the summer bonus. The GEO asked for a vote to approve both the original wage demand of 60 percent and the “supposal” as a possible alternative to be presented to the university at some future date. The motion was passed.

There has been no further elaboration of the “supposal” at membership meetings and no vote has been held to ditch the original wage demand and replace it with the new one. At the April 12 general membership meeting, the summer bonus plan was mentioned only in passing.

At the April 5 membership meeting, the GEO leadership asserted that the university might be more likely to accept the summer compensation plan because a 7 percent increase “sounds better” than a 60 percent increase written into a contract. One has to ask, “sounds better” to whom?

Certainly not to the workers, either at U-M or beyond the campus. Workers would only be strengthened and encouraged if the U-M strikers stuck to their guns and waged the type of struggle required to force the university to pay a living wage. But clearly, this is not the audience to which the GEO/AFT bargainers are oriented. They are seeking to subordinate the grad students to what is deemed acceptable by the university, the union bureaucracy and the Democratic Party. And what is acceptable to these forces is a further cut in the real pay of the grad students and a betrayal of their demand for a decent wage.

Behind the workers’ demands, on the one hand, and the maneuvers of the union leaders, on the other, are broader

political and class issues. The actions of both the university and the GEO-AFT leadership are driven by their connections to the Democratic Party, which is overseeing a policy of escalating war abroad and attacks on the working class at home.

Many of the GEO leaders are connected to the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), a wing of the Democratic Party. DSA members in Congress and city governments have attacked the struggles of workers, including voting to ban a strike and impose a sellout contract on railroad workers, and supporting US imperialism’s escalating war against Russia and its preparations for war against China.

Fundamental political issues—war, rising inflation, cuts to social spending and the growing wave of strikes and class struggles globally—are what ultimately drive the conduct of the strike. The Democratic Party relies on the trade union bureaucracies to keep workers’ struggles isolated from each other and block a mass independent social and political movement of the working class against the capitalist system.

To prevent the sellout of their strike and win the fight for a living wage requires that graduate student workers form a rank-and-file strike committee to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the GEO-AFT leadership. The central aim of such a committee must be to mobilize mass support among students and other workers on campus, as well as the broader working class in the Detroit region, nationally and internationally. Workers everywhere face the same social crisis and have a shared interest in guaranteeing a living wage for all workers as well as universal access to free, high quality public education.



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