

Michigan education unions hold Lansing lobby stunt while isolating striking University of Michigan grad student workers

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The American Federation of Teachers-Michigan will hold its annual lobby day May 4 in the state capital of Lansing, which is aimed at promoting the Democrats as friends of labor and public education. The event occurs as the AFT-MI bureaucracy deliberately isolates the five-week strike by 1,300 University of Michigan graduate student employees who are in a pitched battle against the very same Democrats who control the university's board of regents. It also occurs just weeks after the Democratic majority in both houses of the state legislature upheld the state ban on strikes by teachers and public workers.

The other teachers union in the state, the Michigan Education Association (MEA) is also promoting the Democrats by urging their members to ask lawmakers to overturn a long list of anti-worker legislation, which was enacted when the Republicans controlled the state legislature.

For all the hype about the "progressive" achievements of the administration of Governor Gretchen Whitmer, the Democratic Party has left intact the 1947 ban on strikes by public employees. In fact, that law has been amended in subsequent years to add onerous fines and proscriptions on teachers who do strike. In March this year, Michigan Democrats slapped down an attempt to tie the successful overturn of the 2012 right-to-work law to a provision rescinding the ban on public worker strikes.

At the same time, the courageous strike by University of Michigan graduate student instructors (GSIs) and graduate student staff assistants (GSSAs) is in danger of being sold out by AFT-MI Local 3550 and its affiliated union, the Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO).

Having faced an intransigent administration that has sought injunctions and other legal measures to end the strike and beat back the university instructors' demands for a decent wage, graduate student workers have experienced first hand the reaction and pro-business role of the Democrats.

When it comes to opposing the struggles of workers against inflation and austerity, the Democrats prefer to use the services of the union bureaucracy to crush the resistance of the working class while the Republicans tend to marginalize and undermine the unions.

When the strike began, initial attempts by the University of Michigan to force the strikers back to work failed, with Washtenaw County Circuit Court Judge Carol Kuhnke denying a request by the administration to issue a temporary restraining order on the strike. Six days later, on April 10, the same judge ruled against the university's demand for a preliminary injunction. To avoid the mass defiance of such a strikebreaking order, the judge made a political decision to leave it to the AFT to strangle the strike.

The University of Michigan is working with the Whitmer administration to end to the strike based on the board of regent's regressive demands. The graduate workers are also face a renewed strikebreaking effort with a Michigan administrative law judge supporting the university's unfair labor practice filing and declaring the strike illegal. The decision was originally set to be reviewed by the Michigan Employment Relations Commission (MERC) on April 28, however, no decision had been issued at the time of this writing.

When the strike began, the demands advanced by the graduate student workers were just, if modest. To make up for inflation and raise pay to a living wage in the

expensive Ann Arbor area the workers were demanding a 60 percent increase to bring their pay from \$24,000, a barely subsistence salary, to a still very modest level that would help compensate for the rampant inflation over the past couple of years.

The attempt by the AFT bureaucracy and the Democratic Party to isolate and wear down the strike is being given critical assistance by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), a pseudo-left organization that functions as a faction of the Democratic Party.

The leaders of other AFT-affiliated locals at UM, such as the Lecturers' Employee Organization and AFT locals at the university health care system are doing nothing to mobilize their members behind the GEO strikers. In this they are operating with the tacit support of the GEO/DSA leaders who are working to impose diktats from AFT President Weingarten and Democrats in Lansing.

What is urgently needed is for teachers across the state to reject the sabotage by the AFT and Michigan Education Association (MEA) and organize rank-and-file committees at their schools to provide all-out support to the strikers at UM. Tens of thousands of public school teachers in the state, including teachers in Detroit and suburban schools, are themselves facing contract expirations this year.

With the ending of pandemic relief monies to schools, school employees are being told they must take cuts in pay, while being forced to endure deteriorating working conditions in the schools under conditions where the COVID-19 pandemic continues. The power of 80,000 active teachers and thousands of support staff in schools across the state, including those working under contracts signed by the AFT, the NEA and UAW must be mobilized in support of UM grad workers and against the attacks on education.

In an attempt to prevent Detroit teachers, the largest and historically most militant concentration of school employees in the state, from supporting the strike, Detroit Federation of Teachers President Larkia Lumpkins-Wilson falsely claimed at a membership meeting on April 13 that a settlement had been reached, and that the University of Michigan strike was over. That lie, including her erroneous and absurd announcement that the UM strikers had "won" a 60 percent pay raise, getting them to \$34,000, was quickly

exposed when she was challenged by a teacher and member of the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee in attendance at the union meeting.

The MEA and AFT, while calling for workers to have a "voice" in Lansing with futile stunts like the May Lobby Day exercise, will not challenge the anti-strike law head-on, and would, in fact, welcome the intervention of the state if teachers defy their union leaders and decide to walk out.

The Democrats are not friends of labor, they are the friends of the labor bureaucracy. Like the Republicans, they are party of the corporate and financial oligarchy and the military industrial complex. Biden is preparing a budget "compromise" with the Republican to slash social spending even as he finds trillions to bail out the banks and fund the US proxy war against Russia and military buildup against China.

Teachers are under relentless attack in Michigan, nationally and globally. To both defend public education, and secure decent salaries, job security, benefits and working conditions for teachers and support staff requires an independent fighting organization controlled by the rank and file, not the right-wing AFT and MEA bureaucracies. We urge teachers to join the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and take up this fight.



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