

AFT and GEO liquidate strike by grad student workers at University of Michigan

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The Graduate Employees' Organization leadership, in conjunction with the GEO's parent union, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), has de facto ended the month-long strike by University of Michigan (U-M) graduate student instructors (GSIs), which began on March 29.

While GEO officials claim the strike is officially continuing through the spring-summer semester, they have shut down picketing and announced that GSIs employed by the university to teach classes over the next several months will carry out their work assignments. They will be working without a contract, the previous agreement having ended on May 1.

GSIs involved in the strike have been left in a precarious position by the AFT bureaucracy and its local GEO agents. Already unable to survive on their poverty wage of \$24,000 a year, they were docked a month's pay by the university for striking during April.

Moreover, they face the threat of being disciplined and even fired by the university, which has obtained a preliminary ruling from a state magistrate upholding its claim that the strike is illegal and in violation of a no-strike clause in the expired contract. The Michigan Employment Relations Commission (MERC) is set to meet on May 8 and could approve the preliminary ruling.

As the GEO strike unfolded at U-M, academic strikes broke out at Rutgers University in New Jersey and at three campuses in the Chicago region, as academic workers rose up against decaying conditions shared by university staff and students. The AFT deliberately kept these struggles separate from one another and isolated each of the strikes, with no opposition from the GEO at U-M. The AFT proceeded to call off the strikes in New Jersey and Illinois in order to ram through sellout contracts that met none of the workers' demands. The union bureaucracy called off the strike by 9,000 academic workers at Rutgers without having even reached a tentative agreement with the administration.

In addition to the GEO, the AFT is the parent union of the Lecturers Employee Organization (LEO) at U-M and is the official bargaining agent for two groups of health workers at U-M's hospital and health care system based in Ann Arbor. The GEO leadership never called for solidarity strike action by the other AFT locals on the campus, nor did it call for other sections of workers in Michigan and beyond to mobilize against the university's strike-breaking actions and refusal to discuss the GSIs' demand for a living wage.

The AFT, with the tacit support of the GEO leadership, has

worked to starve out the strikers, refusing to provide strike pay. According to the most recent AFT filing with the Labor Department, the union has net assets of \$55 million and its president, Randi Weingarten, received a salary of \$426,000.

The U-M strike and the broader academic strike wave in the US are part of a resurgence of class struggle internationally. This is being fueled by the massive diversion of funds for the US-led war against Russia in Ukraine and preparations for conflict with China, paid for through cuts in social programs and attacks on workers' jobs and wages. In every capitalist country, the ruling class is turning to police-state methods to suppress rising popular opposition and encouraging the rise of fascist forces. Meanwhile, countless billions are being allocated to bail out failing banks and cover the losses of rich depositors.

In line with these measures is the complete abandonment of mitigation measures to stop the spread of COVID-19 and other deadly diseases.

The union bureaucracy has been integrated into the corporate structure and functions as an arm of the capitalist state against the working class, primarily through the Democratic Party. The GEO, controlled by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), a faction of the Democratic Party and the union bureaucracy, has intentionally concealed the fact that behind the university stands the Democratic Party-controlled U-M Board of Regents and the Democratic administration of Governor Gretchen Whitmer.

In a Twitter post, the GEO announced that on May 3, GEO Vice President Ember McCoy, along with other grad student union officials across the US, participated in a meeting with Bernie Sanders. That left-talking fraud has devoted his political career to attempting to provide a "left" cover to the Democratic Party as it conducted one war after another, adopted Trump's COVID-19 "herd immunity" policy of mass infection and implemented a policy of austerity for workers and bank bailouts and record profits for the corporations.

The isolation and de facto liquidation of the strike cannot be attributed to a lack of support for the grad workers among faculty, students and staff at the university. Most students are appalled at the arrogance and indifference of the university and its million-dollar-a-year president Santa Ono to the desperate plight of grad students, who are forced to live on the edge of destitution. They are appreciative of the long hours the GSIs put in and their dedication to their students.

During U-M's graduation commencement ceremony on April 29

a plane towing a banner with the phrase “Congrats! So proud! Love from striking GSIs” garnered loud cheers from the crowd of graduating seniors.

Hundreds of faculty members signed a protest letter denouncing the university’s strike-breaking tactics and many others pledged to withhold grades in solidarity with the strikers. Masters students stopped grading exams when they learned U-M was using them as scabs against the GSIs.

Most recently, on May 1, over a dozen faculty members from U-M’s political science department signed an open letter to the university leadership defending the academic freedom of those refusing to turn in grades and supporting the strike, noting the increase in housing and childcare costs in the Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti over the last decade.

The IYSSE reached out to the signers of these open letters and received statements from faculty members supporting the strike and the withholding of grades.

Dr. George Hoffman, professor of French language and literature, described the deterioration of conditions in academic work, contrasting present graduate worker conditions to those he faced decades ago:

I calculated the graduate stipend I received in 1982 into today’s dollars: once I saw that our GSIs are earning several thousand dollars less than I did forty years ago, all the while facing far more uncertain employment outcomes, as well as responding to increased demands to become a multi-modal, digitally informed, public-facing scholar, I knew something was wrong with the University’s stance.

Dr. Terri Friedline, associate professor of social work, echoing her colleagues, argued that graduate students should be “adequately compensated for their labor and earn wages that match the cost of living in Ann Arbor.” She emphasized the importance of the striking students’ social demands and concerns, including “transgender health care and a community-led, non-police, unarmed emergency response.” She added that “[W]e’re also in an era generally of rising fascism and White supremacy, when threats of discipline and punishment make acts of solidarity extremely important.”

Dr. Kristen Harrison, a professor and media psychologist, gave the following comment:

Like most faculty, I have loyalties to all of my students, both undergraduate and graduate, so this has been hard. Yesterday I was explaining the strike to my three teenagers and found myself relying on popular culture as usual: ‘Follow the money and see where it goes.’ My kid replied, ‘The emperor has no clothes?’ My other kid said, ‘No, the grad students have no clothes. They can’t afford them.’ From the mouths of babes.

Dr. Ashley Lucas, professor of theater and drama at U-M’s Residential College and member of both the Prison Creative Arts Project and the Carceral State Project, described the hypocrisy of the university:

The University of Michigan prides itself on being one of the premier public research universities in the world, yet during its negotiations with GEO, it has consistently withheld a living wage for its graduate students.

She continued:

When these students entered into a labor strike because the university had stalled meaningful negotiations for months, university administration resorted very quickly to union-busting tactics, including taking their students to court, having the campus police detain nonviolent student protestors at an off-campus location where university police have no jurisdiction, and docking the pay of all graduate workers who refused to file the attestation of labor statements that the university demanded they fill out, whether the graduate students had been striking or not.

Pointing out the vast financial resources of U-M, which include its more than \$17 billion endowment, Dr. Lucas added,

The University of Michigan has both the power and the money to end this strike at any time by offering a fair contract with a living wage for all graduate students on all three of its campuses.



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