IYSSE member calls on U-M students, faculty, staff to mobilize in support of graduate student instructors' fight for a living wage

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The following interview was given by a member of the University of Michigan International Youth and Students for Social Equality. An undergrad, he explains the critical role the graduate student instructors (GSIs) play in the life of the university and the education of students. Some 1,300 GSIs went out on strike on March 29 to demand a living wage and other benefits. They are members of the Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO) at U-M, an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).

Despite the broad support that exists for the grad student workers among students, faculty and staff at the university, the AFT and the GEO have isolated their struggle, dropping their demand for a 60 percent wage increase from their current poverty pay of $24,000 a year and effectively liquidating their strike, while the university maintains its hard-line, strikebreaking stance.

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The grad students' demands are very reasonable and justifiable. GSIs play a crucial role in the functioning of the university. They deserve fair compensation and job security. Furthermore, they need adequate funds and support for their research and professional development.

Without the graduate students, no grades are distributed. The University of Michigan is a major university. My classes have hundreds of students, who submit hundreds and thousands of assignments. Lecturers aren't the ones actually dealing with those assignments. The GSIs do the grading, the reading. All my essays—I don't know if the lecturers or faculty members that teach me ever see or grade my work.

The graduate students, they're the ones I think of as my teachers because I get into discussions with them. They're the ones I interact with. They're the ones that I'm learning a lot from. Their work is just as important as that of the lecturers and faculty.

I've looked through the pay they give out at Michigan. Some faculty make up to $500,000 annually, while my GSI cannot get groceries. The GSIs occupy a critical job. The conditions faced by GSIs are unfair, exploitative and wicked.

Lots of graduate students have families. U-M provides exclusive living space on campus for graduate students with families, yet GSIs are making a ridiculous wage. They're not making nearly enough for what they do. The university recognizes the need for housing availability for students who have families, but they don't support the GSIs as employees. The administration doesn't support them. The GSIs are working and struggling. It's no way to live. And it doesn't have to be that way.

The tutors that I have put in a lot of work with the students, maintaining accommodating office hours to make sure that everyone in the class can get their points for office hours. They care for the students. It is really touching. They don't have to do all that. They go the extra mile, and they're not rewarded for that. It's not recognized.

I believe that it's important that we begin building a rank-and-file committee at U-M to stop the breaking of strikes and get the GSIs' voices heard. We need to shut down the campus until their demands are met.

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The strike must not retreat from its demand for a 60 percent wage increase. GSIs deserve to live comfortably. It's absolutely despicable that the university is not paying them at all. The docking of pay was the nail in the coffin. That was one of the most shocking things I'd seen. It's inhumane.

I call on students to support the GEO strike and other campus employees. This is representative of a much bigger struggle of the working class—and educators in general—all over the world. Educators have not been compensated well for what they do. We must extend the strike to the best of our abilities to other sections of the world and workers across Michigan. This struggle isn't just that of the graduate students.

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