

University of Michigan submits new wage-cutting contract to striking graduate workers

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We want to hear from you: Fill out the form below to tell us what you think about the grad student instructors' strike, the strikebreaking threats of the university and the conditions facing students and campus workers.

On May 16, the Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO), the collective bargaining agent for 2,300 graduate student instructors (GSIs) at the University of Michigan, held its latest contract meeting with the U-M administration. The grad student instructors have been on strike since March 29 in a fight for a living wage.

They currently make only \$24,000 a year and won broad support from faculty, staff and students at the university for their initial demand for a 60 percent wage increase in the first year of a three-year contract. However, the leadership of the GEO, an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), has worked in tandem with the AFL bureaucracy to isolate the strikers in the face of a brutal strike-breaking drive by the university administration.

The GEO/AFT has not only abandoned the demand for a 60 percent wage increase, it has effectively liquidated the strike. With the approach of graduation at the end of April, the GEO called off all picketing and encouraged GSIs assigned to summer courses to report to work.

On May 12, the U-M administration issued a slightly revised contract offer that not only meets none of the workers' demands, it proposes a further cut in real wages. The new offer calls for a total wage increase for GSIs at the main campus in Ann Arbor of 12.5 percent over three years, well below the rate of inflation. For GSIs at the university's Dearborn and Flint campuses, the wage offer is an even more insulting 6.75 percent over three years.

The wage offer at the main campus—5 percent in year

one, 4 percent in year two and 3.5 percent in the final year—amounts to an increase of 1 percent from the university's original offer of 11.5 percent over the life of the contract. At the Dearborn and Flint campuses, the increase over the original offer is a mere 0.5 percent.

In releasing its contract offer, the administration denounced the union, accusing it of refusing to bargain in good faith. It issued an ultimatum, stating, in essence, that if the union did not accept the new offer, the university would petition the Michigan Employment Relations Commission (MERC) to initiate a "fact-finding" process, setting the stage for the administration to declare an impasse and unilaterally impose its contract proposal.

The university had already obtained a preliminary unfair labor practices ruling, currently under review by MERC, charging the union with calling an illegal strike, based on a no-strike clause in the previous contract, which did not expire until May 1. The administration has cited the no-strike clause, agreed to by the GEO and AFT, which explicitly empowers it to discipline individual strikers, up to and including termination.

On May 17, the university followed through with its threat and officially made the call for fact-finding by the state labor relations agency.

On May 8, the administration issued a statement claiming it had obtained 91 percent of final grades for the previous semester. This was done to belittle the impact of the work action, since the GEO had called on GSIs to withhold final grades. A considerable number of faculty members had signed open letters denouncing the university's strike-breaking tactics and pledging to withhold final grades for their courses. This has led many GSIs, students and faculty members to charge on

social media that the administration is either falsifying grades or using strikebreakers to grade final exams.

The GEO leadership has responded to the fact-finding petition by pledging to cooperate in the process. Lead negotiator Evelyn Smith issued a statement declaring that the GSIs “are prepared to participate fully in this process and are confident that MERC will find that the facts support our positions.” Amir Fleischman, chair of the GEO contract committee, parroted these remarks, stating, “We are confident that fact-finding will only serve to vindicate our position.”

According to GSIs who have spoken to the WWSWS, there has been no formal communication from the GEO leadership on the petition. The GEO has also largely remained silent on its Twitter account regarding the petition, instead focusing on the administration’s suspect grading measures.

The silence from the GEO leadership on the petition contradicts an earlier warning it issued to its members in an email before the May 16 contract bargaining session, in which it called the threat of a fact-finding petition “an escalation by the administration because the fact-finding lays the groundwork for declaring ‘impasse,’ a legal maneuver that allows U-M to impose its last, best and final offer on us.”

This downplaying of the dangers facing the GSIs is a conscious move by the GEO leadership that stems from its perspective of promoting the Democratic Party and sections of the trade union bureaucracy and opposing the independent social and political mobilization of the working class in defense of its basic interests and rights.

The GEO is controlled politically by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), a pseudo-left faction of the Democratic Party that is being increasingly integrated into the pro-corporate trade union apparatus. The role of the DSA is to provide a fraudulent “progressive” gloss to the Democratic Party and the trade union bureaucracy in order to channel the growing anger and resistance of workers and young people to war, inequality and all of the other evils of the capitalist system behind the two-party system, thereby blocking the emergence of a mass movement of the working class fighting for socialism.

The GEO leadership has worked with the rabidly pro-war and anti-socialist AFT bureaucracy to isolate and weaken the strike. The AFT, which has \$55 million in

net assets, has refused to give GSIs strike pay, which the GEO leadership has accepted without protest.

The AFT, again with the silent support of the GEO leadership, has refused to call for the expansion of the strike. It has done nothing to mobilize other AFT locals at U-M’s three campuses as well as the university’s Michigan Medicine hospital system. These include the Lecturers Employee Organization (LEO), two locals representing workers at Michigan Medicine in Ann Arbor, and the recently founded University Staff United (USU).

The GSI strike at U-M is part of a broader wave of academic workers struggles that rose across the US, including several strikes by other AFT locals following the onset of the U-M strike in March. At one point academic workers in the AFT were on strike at U-M, three campuses in Illinois and Rutgers University in New Jersey. In each case, the AFT bureaucracy purposely kept strikers isolated while it moved to shut them down and force through sellout contracts. The GEO leadership never opposed these betrayals.

It has deliberately sought to conceal the direct role of the Democratic Party in the U-M attack on the GSIs—the fact that the Democratic Party dominates the U-M Board of Regents and controls the statehouse, both houses of the state legislature and MERC.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality at U-M calls for students, faculty members and staff to mobilize in support of the GSI strikers and their demand for a living wage. There is powerful latent support that can be mobilized among autoworkers, who are facing a crucial contract fight this September, UPS workers, who face a contract battle this summer, Amazon workers and many other sections of the working class, both in Michigan, nationally and internationally.

The IYSSE supports efforts to establish a rank-and-file committee among the GSIs to take control of the strike and the contract negotiations.



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