

Jacobin covers for DSA betrayal of U-M grad students' strike

Luke Galvin, Matthew Brennan
16 June 2023

Over 1,300 graduate student instructors (GSIs) have been on strike at the University of Michigan since March 29, led by the Graduate Employees Organization (GEO), a local of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). GSIs demanded a 60 percent wage increase, expanded health care coverage, remote instruction options during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and other democratic rights and protections.

On May 14, *Jacobin*, the unofficial publication of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), published its first and only article on the strike, an interview with four GEO leadership members: the chair of GEO's Publicity Committee and bargaining team member, Amir Fleischmann; GEO member Alejo Stark; GEO steward and organizing committee member Yileigh Zhang; and GEO bargaining team member Caroline Leland.

Peter Lucas, a DSA campaign staffer for New York State Assemblyman Zohran Mamdani, conducted the interview. Most of the GEO leadership aligns with or are members of the DSA, with both Stark and Fleischmann writing articles for *Jacobin* in recent years.

The interview, titled "Graduate Workers at the University of Michigan Have Been on Strike for Over a Month," was published two weeks after the GEO and AFT bureaucracies effectively liquidated the strike by ending all picketing and permitting GSIs to return to teaching for the Spring-Summer semesters.

While the strike is technically ongoing and the GEO/AFT continue to meet in bargaining sessions with the University, the only remaining active strike measures now being promoted are plans for spring-summer GSIs to withhold grades, which would likely result in disciplinary actions by the University.

The timing of the interview and *Jacobin*'s previous silence are not accidental. Unintentionally, it provides a damning exposure of the role of the GEO and the AFT bureaucracy in betraying the strike and the DSA's role in supporting and covering up this betrayal.

The interview is most significant for what both Lucas and the GEO leadership refuse to mention. Most of the core issues which initially drove the strike—above all the call for the 60 percent wage increase—were studiously avoided in the discussion. The fact that the GEO had *de facto* ended the strike by the time the interview was published is also withheld from readers.

Never mentioned by name is the AFT, which has worked closely with the GEO leadership throughout the strike and preceding bargaining sessions. Other than a brief reference to not "getting solid advice from our parent union" in the 2020 GEO strike, there is no direct reference to the AFT in the entire discussion. The GEO leaders' silence on the role of the AFT intentionally obscures the way in which this union, one of the largest in the United States, routinely isolates, limits, and suppresses strikes by educators across the country, as it has once again at U-M.

From the beginning of the strike, the AFT bureaucracy, which holds \$55 million in net assets, refused to fund strike pay to GEO members, instead offering to cover interest on a loan for just one year.

Throughout April, in the early weeks of the U-M strike, a wave of academic strikes broke out across the eastern half of the US. On April 10, over 9,000 full-time faculty, part-time adjuncts and graduate student workers went on strike in New Jersey. Academic worker strikes broke out at three universities in Illinois nearly simultaneously—Chicago State University, Eastern Illinois University and Governors State University—all under the leadership of the AFT and its locals.

The AFT betrayed and sold out all four of these strikes in less than two weeks, greatly weakening the sole remaining strike, at U-M. There, the AFT refused to call for support or an expansion of the strike among its other locals on campus, which include the Lecturers Employee Organization (LEO), two locals representing workers at the U-M-owned Michigan Medicine hospital system in Ann Arbor, and the recently founded University Staff United.

The AFT's division of the LEO and GEO workers is referred to obliquely by Zhang in response to Lucas' question, "What have been the biggest challenges organizing within your respective departments?"

After blaming faculty for not supporting the GEO strike, Zhang notes, "Lecturers who are sympathetic to the strike also find it difficult to not follow the administration, because the university has implied that it would discontinue their contract in the next year if the grades were not submitted on time." Zhang omits the fact that at no point in the strike did the AFT ever seek to organize LEO members to effectively support the GEO strikers.

Replying to the same question, Fleischmann voices the GEO leadership's cavalier attitude to the loss of pay among rank-and-file strikers, while giving the AFT a complete pass for withholding strike pay. He states:

[P]retty much every striking worker missed a full month of pay because of the strike. We knew this was a real possibility going in. The university was very clear from the beginning that it would be docking our pay if we went on strike. What's been incredible about it is that so many workers were willing to forgo their April paychecks, because they knew that the issues that we are struggling for are too important to accept the university's line that we need to settle for less. If it means that we have to miss our April paychecks, so be it.

While deliberately ignoring these issues, the GEO leaders and Lucas instead focus almost entirely on their feeble appeals to the U-M administration to take their demands seriously. The largely Democratic Party-controlled university administration and Board of Regents are entirely hostile to the GSIs, and have been since beginning of the strike.

In April, the university obtained a preliminary unfair labor practices ruling, which remains under review by the Michigan Employment Relations Commission (MERC), charging the union with calling the strike

illegally. The university cited the no-strike clause in the previous contract, which did not expire until May 1. The no-strike clause, which the GEO and AFT agreed to in 2020, explicitly empowers the university to discipline individual strikers, including up to termination.

On May 12, the U-M administration issued a slightly revised contract offer that laid out substantial real wage cuts. The new proposal calls for a total wage increase for GSIs at the main campus in Ann Arbor of just 12.5 percent over three years (5 percent in year one, 4 percent in year two and 3.5 percent in the final year) and 6.75 percent for Dearborn and Flint GSIs in the same period. This remains far below the current inflation rate and amounts to an increase of just 1 percent from the university's original offer of 11.5 percent for the Ann Arbor campus and 0.5 percent for the Dearborn and Flint campuses over the life of the contract.

Presenting this as its best and final offer, the university simultaneously released an effective ultimatum demanding the GEO accept the contract or the university would petition the MERC to initiate a "fact-finding" process, setting the stage for the administration to declare an impasse and unilaterally impose its contract proposal.

The administration followed through with this threat on May 17, officially calling for fact-finding by the state labor relations agency. The GEO leadership immediately capitulated before the administration's latest efforts to crush the strike, pledging to cooperate with the fact-finding process while appealing to MERC to rule in its favor.

Despite the gravity of this action by the university to break the strike by force and the danger it poses to the GSIs, GEO leader Zhang downplayed its significance in last month's interview in *Jacobin*, stating, "This decision [the unfair labor practices ruling] is a recommendation from the [MERC] that GEO members return to work, but this is only a recommendation... MERC ultimately does not have enforcement power."

Most critically, the *Jacobin* interview never references the massive political, economic and social struggles taking place globally, i.e., the broader context in which the U-M strike is taking place.

Critically, the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, which threatens to unleash a nuclear war that could destroy human civilization, is not mentioned. To fund the war, the Democratic and Republican representatives of the US ruling class have moved to strip the working class of its most basic rights and conditions.

At the time of the interview, the US debt ceiling deal discussion was underway between the Biden administration and congressional Republicans, which forecast massive cuts to social services, food stamps and health care, while increasing funding for the military war machine.

These conditions have led to a significant growth of class conflict internationally, as workers cannot live under conditions of ever-deepening austerity by the ruling classes of the world. Mass protests have gripped France, Israel, Sri Lanka and dozens of other countries, as the international working class rebels against attacks on its living conditions and democratic rights.

Why is this broader political context ignored by Lucas and the GEO leaders?

In publishing an interview devoid of any discussion of the political issues driving the strike, the DSA and *Jacobin* aim to obfuscate and redirect attention away from the Democratic Party, which plays a key role in almost every facet of the U-M strike. Most of the U-M Regents, the AFT and GEO leadership and the DSA are all directly or indirectly connected to the Democratic Party, and help implement its policy of war and austerity for the working class.

The direct relationship between the GEO and the Democrats was made very clear in a Twitter thread posted to the GEO leadership's account on May 19. Responding to a U-M Regents meeting, the GEO leadership claimed the regents are out of step with the Democratic Party leadership, i.e., they are not "real" Democrats because they are against the strike.

In an abject lie, the GEO leaders state, "Everyone from the United Auto

Workers to Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer to Bernie Sanders agrees that grads deserve a living wage & a fair contract."

The Democratic Party is in fact one of the two key factions of the ruling class seeking to suppress all strikes and any signs of opposition by the working class. The Democrats control the Michigan state government, which supports the assault on the U-M strikers. At the federal level, where the Democrats control the presidency and the Senate, they are spearheading the bipartisan war effort against Russia while imposing brutal social cuts on workers.

DSA members who are part of the Democratic Party conference in the US House of Representatives, such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, have voted for US arms shipments to Ukraine in the US-NATO war against Russia and support the Biden administration's military escalation. They back Biden's reelection, despite his massive cuts in food stamps, Medicaid and other social programs. The DSA Democrats facilitated Biden's banning of a strike and imposition of a company-dictated contract against the rail workers last year.

Just as outrageous is the claim that the UAW backs the strike action by GSIs at U-M. Newly elected DSA-backed UAW president Shawn Fain, whom the GEO has promoted in previous statements, has worked to isolate and crush strikes by autoworkers in Toledo, Ohio and Van Buren Township, Michigan.

Among academic workers, the UAW bureaucracy has played a rotten role. In 2021, the UAW local representing over 3,000 GSIs at Columbia University went on strike twice, with the UAW bureaucracy moving to "pause" the first part of the strike in April. The second stage of the strike, which began in the fall, continued into February 2022, when the UAW forced through a sellout contract, cutting real wages for the GSIs.

Last winter, the UAW local at the University of California betrayed a strike by 48,000 teaching assistants, researchers and post-docs. At the New School in New York, also in December, the UAW isolated and crushed a strike by 1,600 adjunct professors.

The GSIs at U-M must take the *Jacobin* cover-up and the actions of the GEO leadership as a warning. If left in the hands of the GEO leadership and the DSA, their strike faces defeat, with a sellout contract that will slash real wages and further degrade working conditions.

There is powerful latent support for the GSIs among autoworkers, students, service workers, UPS workers and many other sections of the working class in the region and internationally, which has found expression throughout the strike.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) supports the GSIs' fight for a living wage, expanded health care and safe working conditions. To secure these rights, efforts must now be made to establish a rank-and-file strike committee of GSIs and other workers on campus, which would allow them to take control of the strike and broaden their fight to other sections of workers.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact