

GEO accepts “illegal strike” ruling in contract talks with University of Michigan

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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 June 7, the Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO), an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the bargaining agent for striking graduate student instructors (GSIs) at the University of Michigan (U-M), made a series of concessions to university negotiators that included accepting a preliminary ruling declaring the strike illegal. These concessions immensely strengthen the hand of the administration in imposing a wage-cutting contract on the workers, who walked out on strike 1,300-strong on March 29.

The grad students have waged a determined struggle for a substantial wage increase over their poverty salary of \$24,000, alongside improvements in health care and working conditions. They voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike centered on the demand for a 60 percent wage increase in the first year of a three-year contract.

But in the face of an intractable U-M administration and Board of Regents, backed by the Democratic-led state government, the AFT and GEO leadership quickly dropped the 60 percent wage demand, while effectively liquidating the strike in the lead-up to the end of the winter-spring semester and expiration of the old contract on May 1. The GEO suspended all picketing and allowed GSIs in the union to instruct classes over the summer period.

The university has barely budged on its insulting wage offer, well below the inflation rate. 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 a total of 6.75 percent for Dearborn and Flint GSIs over the same period.

Now the union leadership is going further in setting up the rank-and-file for a sellout contract that will impose a further cut in real wages and compound the exploitative conditions under which they conduct the bulk of instruction of undergrads.

U-M Public Affairs reported on June 9 that the union had responded to a slightly revamped proposal from the university by agreeing to drop all three of its unfair labor practice (ULP) complaints filed with the Michigan Employment Relations Commission (MERC). The complaints concerned the refusal of the university to address the union demands concerning on-campus policing and compensation for social work students working in an external field placement or internships.

More importantly, the GEO agreed to waive its right to appeal a preliminary ruling by an administrative law judge handed down in April supporting the university's ULP charge that the grad students' strike was illegal because it violated a no-strike clause in the GEO-U-M contract that was still in effect when the union called the strike. The university also based its complaint on a state law banning strikes by public employees.

The Public Affairs report said the union had agreed to “uphold” the April ruling, which is still awaiting official approval by MERC. In its March 29 ULP filing, the university quoted from Article Three of the then-current contract, imposed by the GEO leadership in a sellout of a strike by grad students in 2020, asserting the right of the university to discipline strikers who disrupt university operations during the contract period, up to and including termination.

In return for this stunning capitulation by the GEO, the university agreed to withdraw a suit it had filed on March 30 in Washtenaw County Court asking for financial damages from the GEO on similar grounds as those advanced in its ULP complaint, with the proviso that U-M could at any point refile the legal action.

U-M Public Affairs representative Rick Fitzgerald, speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, claimed that in waving its right to appeal, the GEO leadership had allowed the preliminary ruling declaring the strike illegal to become an official order of MERC. At the same time, he acknowledged that the university had yet to receive official notification from the state agency.

While the university has touted the GEO's agreement to "uphold" the ruling declaring the strike illegal, the GEO leadership has said little to nothing about it, nor explained its implications to rank-and-file members. The GEO membership had no say in this potentially devastating legal concession to the strike-breaking tactics of the university.

The WSWS has sought to contact the GEO—whose listed telephone numbers are not operative—to respond to the university's claim on this issue. It has received no reply.

It appears from the announcement of U-M Public Affairs on the June 7 contract talks that the GEO has made these latest concessions to cement its participation in a state-mediated "fact-finding" process initiated by the university in May. The university is claiming that the union's refusal to accept its contract offer has led to an "impasse" in the negotiations.

The political purpose of "fact-finding" is to impose a bureaucratic straightjacket, blocking any effective strike action or any broader mobilization of support from workers and students by subordinating the GSIs to the machinery of the state government. It is a mechanism for imposing a contract betrayal.

In its June 9 statement, U-M Public Affairs said that "the process can take several months." In other words, it can drag on into the beginning of the fall term. Given that the GEO has already formally accepted in talks with the university the claim that the strike is "illegal," the stage is set for it to oppose any actions that might disrupt classes in August and September in the name of facilitating "fact-finding."

At the onset of the "fact-finding" process, Evelyn Smith, the GEO's lead negotiator, declared 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, added that the leadership was "confident that fact-finding will only serve to vindicate [our] position."

The GEO is politically dominated by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), a pseudo-left faction of the Democratic Party. The union's capitulation to the

university is the outcome of its politics—anti-socialist, pro-Democratic Party and pro-war.

To win their demands for a living wage, expanded health care and improved working conditions, the GSIs must recognize that they are in a fight not just against the university, but also against the Democratic Party, the Biden administration and the AFT bureaucracy. The strike at U-M is part of a broader working class struggle against the policy of the ruling class and both of its parties of war abroad and austerity at home.

Chris, a GSI striker, spoke to the WSWS of the powerful support for the strike in its initial period from other workers, faculty and students—support that the AFT and GEO leadership have refused to mobilize:

It was really nice at the beginning to feel the community coming out. We had lots of local people come out and join in. I was talking to workers on campus, and it would not take much for them to say, "Oh yeah, we are on the same team." Same with the faculty, they're also underpaid.

Chris added that the GSIs knew last fall, when negotiations began, that the university "was planning on a strike, paying their lawyers to work on an injunction and planning on not negotiating in good faith."

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality at U-M urges the GSIs to form a rank-and-file strike committee to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the GEO and AFT leadership. This is essential to broadening the fight to other workers on campus and beyond, including UPS workers who face a strike deadline and autoworkers preparing for a contract battle with the Detroit Three companies in September.



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