

Mobilize workers and students against U-M's strikebreaking threats! Reject the sellout contract!

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8 August 2023

Attend an online meeting on Monday, August 14, at 7:00 pm (EST) to unite the struggles of University of Michigan graduate students, Detroit teachers, workers and parents to oppose the assault on wages, living conditions and education. The meeting is hosted by the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality at UM and Wayne State University. Register here.

All workers and students must be mobilized to oppose the vicious strikebreaking threats of the University of Michigan administration against graduate student instructors (GSIs) and graduate student staff assistants (GSSAs) at the university.

On Monday afternoon, the administration sent a letter to all 2,200 GSIs/GSSAs demanding that they accept the “offer” presented in May to the Graduate Employees Organization (GEO), an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).

Last week, the administration presented a new proposal that contained marginal increases in pay from the offer in May, while meeting none of the strikers’ main demands. It gave the ultimatum that this agreement had to be accepted within two days, by Friday. In its letter on Monday, the university declared that the deadline had passed and therefore the new agreement had been withdrawn.

The letter then proceeded to bullying threats. “The University of Michigan expects that all instructors will fulfill their instructional responsibilities” in the fall, it declared—that is, that the strike will end. It stated, “GSIs who engage in a work stoppage will be subject to replacement for the entire semester if the university hires or assigns another individual to perform their duties, or if the university restructures the course.”

In other words, accept our “offer” or else the university will replace strikers and prevent them from being paid at all for the entire fall semester, even if an agreement is reached.

All academic workers at U-M should mobilize against

these threats and defend the striking GSIs and GSSAs! What is done to them will be done to all workers at the university. Moreover, students should reject with contempt the continued efforts of the university to pit them against graduate instructors. The quality of education at the university will not be aided by enforcing poverty conditions on academic workers, let alone replacing them with strikebreakers.

At the same time, graduate workers must take stock of the role being played by the leadership of the GEO, which is working with the apparatus of the AFT to shut down the strike on the basis of a rotten sellout.

During a membership meeting on Thursday, the GEO revealed that the new agreement (now withdrawn) was worked out in behind-the-scenes talks with the AFT Michigan and the president of the Lecturer Employees’ Organization (LEO), also an AFT affiliate. When questioned about this by graduate students, the GEO justified the backroom deals by saying, “This seems to be the way they do things. AFT has invested a lot of time and energy.”

The AFT bureaucrats have, in fact, invested a substantial amount of time in isolating and shutting down the strike at U-M. During the first month of the U-M strike, 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 the walkouts down and force through sellout contracts.

Additionally, the AFT has never had its other locals at U-M—which include the LEO, two locals at Michigan Medicine in Ann Arbor and the recently founded University Staff United (USU)—issue statements, picket or take any action to support the U-M grad student workers’ strike. The GEO leadership has never criticized this or taken any action to unite with fellow members in the LEO, USU and medical locals.

The AFT spent more than \$23 million to support

candidates and the Democratic Party alongside \$3 million in lobbying just over the year of 2022, while AFT President Randi Weingarten makes more than \$540,000 a year. Despite these immense financial assets, the AFT bureaucracy has provided striking graduate workers with no strike pay.

The GEO, whose leadership is politically dominated by the pseudo-left Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), has effectively shut down picketing and all serious strike activity since the end of the Winter/Spring semester in May. It is now actively pushing, along with the AFT, to officially end the strike and impose a sellout contract on the workers before classes resume.

Last week, the GEO presented the proposed contract as “a high level” agreement that contained “significant movement from the university.”

Lead negotiator Evelyn Smith said in an interview with *Detroit News* that this offer “is the closest they have been to a settlement in months.” In another Twitter thread, Smith stated, “We are serious about settling before the start of the Fall term and are willing to do the work to make that happen.”

The contract presented last week contained wage increases of 20 percent over three years, up from 12 percent in the May contract. This would still mean a cut in real wages when inflation is taken into account. GSIs on U-M’s Flint and Dearborn campuses were offered even lower wage increases. The GEO has completely dropped its demand for a 60 percent wage increase in the first year, which it said was necessary for GSIs, who currently receive the poverty wage of \$24,000 a year, to live, alongside strikers’ major demands for improved childcare benefits, healthcare coverage and working conditions.

U-M offered a \$1,000 signing bonus for Ann Arbor GSIs. Dearborn GSIs would receive only \$500, while Flint GSIs were promised nothing. With GSIs making, on average, \$2,700 a month during the fall and winter/spring terms, the “bonus” isn’t even half of the wages striking GSIs lost in April.

In a complete affront to the safety of students and workers, the offer also eliminates any protections and mandated protocols against COVID-19.

Whether in the form of the May agreement or the withdrawn August proposal, the university has made its position clear. Graduate workers should respond through the fight to mobilize all workers and students at U-M, while connecting the strike to the developing movement of workers throughout the United States and internationally.

This requires the development of a rank-and-file committee independent of the AFT apparatus and its promoters in the GEO. Such a committee should formulate

the non-negotiable demands of striking workers and issue an urgent appeal for the broadest support from the working class.

What is happening at U-M cannot be separated from the broader strategy of the ruling class. The Biden administration is spending tens billions of dollars to escalate the war against Russia over Ukraine, while unlimited sums are made available to bail out the banks.

Escalating war abroad requires disciplining the working class at home. To do so, the Biden administration is relying on the trade union bureaucracy and state power to strangle emerging working class struggles. When rank-and-file workers rebel against the pro-corporate apparatus, the Democrats and Republicans unite to force through the demands of the rich, as in the vote by Congress (including members of the DSA) to illegalize a strike by railroad workers last year.

Workers are fighting back. Alongside GSIs, writers in the Writers Guild and actors in SAG-AFTRA, who are themselves being turned into “gig” workers, are waging a critical strike for a livable income, safe working conditions and job security. The union apparatus is presently trying to ram through sellout contracts on dock workers on the West Coast and 340,000 UPS workers across the country.

In the next two weeks, Detroit Public School teachers, who are under an extended contract, are looking to strike as the semester begins. Not long after, in September, the contracts for 150,000 Ford, General Motors and Stellantis workers in the United Auto Workers (UAW) expire, as well as contracts for autoworkers in Canada. The union apparatus is desperately seeking to contain a growing mood of militancy and anger in the rank-and-file.

The unification of these struggles in a common fight against the ruling elite cannot take place through the apparatus of the corporate-controlled unions. It requires a rebellion against the apparatus and the transfer of power to the rank and file through the establishment of rank-and-file committees.

At the same time, the fight for the interests of the working class requires the political mobilization of the all workers in opposition to the entire capitalist system, fusing the fight against inequality and exploitation with the fight against war and dictatorship.

For information of forming a rank-and-file committee at U-M, fill out the form below.



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