

GEO/AFT pushes through sellout contract in U-M grad students' strike

Judy Ryden
12 August 2023

Attend an online meeting on Monday, August 14, at 7 p.m. EDT 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 U-M and Wayne State University. Register here.

On Thursday, the Graduate Employees Organization (GEO), an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), rammed through a sellout contract proposal in the five-month strike by graduate student instructors and staff assistants at the University of Michigan.

The supposedly “progressive” union, politically dominated by the Democratic Socialists of America, a pseudo-left faction of the Democratic Party, utilized the most brazenly bureaucratic, anti-democratic and dishonest methods to obtain passage of a deal dictated by the university. It used the university’s threat of mass firings and its own refusal to mobilize the strong support that exists for the strikers among other campus workers, including AFT members, students and workers more broadly, to push through a proposal that fails to raise wages above the poverty level.

On Friday, the GEO leadership announced that its “counteroffer” to the university’s offer of August 2, since retracted, had been passed “overwhelmingly” by the 900 workers who voted electronically after the Thursday night meeting had concluded. The union provided no numerical breakdown of the vote.

The GEO’s counteroffer accepted the university’s proposal for a total 20 percent wage increase over three years for workers at the Ann Arbor campus, and substantially less at the Dearborn and Flint campuses. The leadership had months before abandoned its initial demand for a 60 percent wage increase, which it said was the minimum needed to raise the strikers’ current average yearly income of \$24,000 to a “living wage.”

The GEO leadership is now working with the administration to officially end the strike well before the fall semester begins on August 28.

Rank and file graduate student workers must oppose this wretched betrayal of their determined struggle for a living wage

and adequate child care and healthcare benefits, as well as protection against the ongoing COVID pandemic.

The false pretenses on which a vote to accept the GEO leadership’s counteroffer was obtained at the membership meeting Thursday night makes it all the more urgent that grad student workers vote “no” on the final agreement being worked out with the university, form a rank-and-file strike committee, and take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands.

This will enable them to coordinate with and mobilize other campus workers, students, Detroit teachers laboring under a miserable extended contract, UPS workers fighting a sellout deal by the Teamsters bureaucracy, and 170,000 US and Canadian auto workers who are determined to reverse decades of concessions when their contracts expire next month.

The GEO leaders’ counteroffer is based on the university’s August 2 proposal, which U-M retracted when the strikers rejected its ultimatum to immediately accept the deal or face being fired and replaced by strikebreakers.

The counteroffer, with only marginal improvements on the August 2 proposal, was made available to rank-and-file graduate student workers only a few hours before the Thursday meeting. In a travesty of democracy, the workers were given only two options in the online vote that followed the meeting: accept the university’s August 2 offer or the GEO/AFT’s counteroffer.

When a worker at the meeting asked why there was no option to reject both offers, the question was ignored by the GEO officials.

On Friday, UM Director of Public Affairs Kim Broekhuizen told the *Detroit Free Press*: “We are encouraged to see the counteroffer presented today by the GEO. This represents significant compromise—and the union’s first real movement on compensation—since negotiations began nine months ago.” He added that he expected a “tentative agreement” would soon be reached.

The GEO counteroffer includes the university’s “Rackham Plan,” which extends fellowship money for covered graduate students to the summer months. However, the plan will apply to less than 50 percent of the graduate student instructors and staff assistants.

It proposes to increase the university’s offer of a \$1,000

signing bonus to \$2,000. However, even were the university to accept this increase, it would not make up for the \$2,600 it docked from the strikers' pay as retaliation for the walkout.

The GEO leaders were compelled to include in their counteroffer a measure on the issue of protection against COVID demanded by workers at the Thursday night meeting and overwhelmingly supported by the rank-and-file. It is a memorandum of understanding establishing the right of grad instructors to mandate masks and proper air filters in their classrooms.

The GEO contract committee chair, Amir Fleischmann, a spokesman for the union, told the *Free Press* on Friday: "On the issue of salary, in terms of the dollar amount of the raise, GEO members are ready to accept that... What remains outstanding, however, are equity-related issues for marginalized groups."

Fleischmann, a DSA member, falsely claims that the union members are satisfied with the pay increase in the counteroffer. He knows full well that the GEO/AFT's isolation of the strike in the face of university strikebreaking left most of those who voted for the union proposal feeling they had no other choice. His reference to "equity-related" issues concerning "marginalized groups" expresses the DSA's use of various forms of identity politics to evade the basic class issues in the struggle and provide a fake "left" cover for the union leadership's betrayal.

Not only was the rank-and-file not given the option of rejecting both sellout contract offers, the membership was never given access to the full text of either proposal. It was only informed of the supposed "highlights" of the GEO counteroffer a few hours before the Thursday night meeting.

Even more damning, on Thursday a joint letter to the membership of the AFT-affiliated Lecturer Employees Organization (LEO) at U-M from LEO President Kirsten Herold, who is also secretary-treasurer of the Michigan AFT, and former AFT Michigan President David Hecker was leaked and posted on Reddit.

The letter describes in considerable detail how, at the initiative of the GEO and DSA, the LEO and Michigan AFT joined with the GEO, along with ex-UAW president and Democratic Party operative Bob King, who is a U-M lecturer and LEO member, to work out a sellout contract deal with the university—all behind the backs of the striking grad student workers.

This conspiracy resulted in the university's "surprise" contract offer of August 2. In other words, the process leading up to Thursday night's membership meeting and vote on the GEO's counteroffer was a highly orchestrated conspiracy against the graduate student workers.

The leaked letter begins:

About 5 weeks or so ago, GEO leaders reached out

first to Ian Robinson (former LEO president) and Bob King (LEO member), and then David Hecker (former AFT MI President), and Kirsten Herold (LEO President and current AFT MI Secretary-Treasurer) to discuss negotiations. On July 9, Kirsten, David and Bob met with GEO leadership. At that meeting GEO leadership asked for our help in securing a contract that addresses the issues of most importance to them, as they outlined to us at that meeting. We (David and Kirsten) spent countless hours over the next weeks talking with Regents and Administration, hoping to secure an offer that was fair to GEO members overall, and represented real progress in terms of salary and other major areas.

The GEO/DSA first let on about the backdoor talks between the state AFT and the university at the online membership meeting on August 2, when the university's new offer was presented. At that time, GEO officials told the rank-and-file that those talks were carried out behind the backs of the GEO, which now appears to have been a blatant lie.

King, it should be noted, as UAW vice president in charge of the Ford division (2006-2010) and then UAW president (2010-2014) imposed the most massive concessions and give-backs to the companies in the history of the UAW, including mass layoffs, the introduction of tiers, the end of cost-of-living adjustments, the de facto abolishment of the eight-hour day, and the replacement of company-paid health benefits for retirees with union-controlled VEBA funds. King allowed the companies to finance the VEBA funds with shares of stock instead of cash, giving the union apparatus a direct financial stake in pumping up company profits and stock prices by slashing wages and benefits and imposing brutal speedup on UAW members.

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



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact