

As University of Michigan rejects GEO/AFT counteroffer

Joint Michigan educators-IYSSE meeting calls for mobilization of workers and students behind grad student strikers

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On Monday, the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (MERFSC) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) clubs at the University of Michigan and Wayne State University held a joint meeting to unite U-M graduate workers, Detroit public school teachers, students and broader sections of workers to defend striking U-M graduate student instructors (GSIs) and Detroit teachers fighting for decent contracts.

The leadership of the Graduate Employees Organization (GEO) and its parent union, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), is moving to impose a sellout contract on the grad student workers dictated by the university administration. The 1,300 striking graduate student instructors have waged a courageous strike since the end of March to end poverty wages by winning a major salary increase, as well as improved childcare and healthcare benefits and protection from COVID-19 infection. The university has rejected the workers' demands and issued an ultimatum that they accept the administration's contract proposal and return to work by the beginning of the fall semester or be fired en masse.

Monday's meeting marked a significant step forward in the struggle to defeat the conspiracy of the union leadership and the Democratic Party to impose sellout contracts, pledging to establish rank-and-file control and unite the struggles of U-M grad student instructors and Detroit teachers. The GEO leadership, which is politically dominated by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), a pseudo-left faction of the Democratic Party, has plotted behind the backs of the strikers with the AFT and ex-UAW President Bob King to impose a contract betrayal and force the strikers back to work.

The meeting was attended by U-M graduate students and undergraduate students, Wayne State University students, Michigan Medicine healthcare workers, Detroit public school teachers, autoworkers and community supporters of the graduate student workers' strike. A resolution, adopted unanimously, declared:

This meeting of the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (MERFSC) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality at University of Michigan and Wayne State University calls for the unity of University of Michigan workers and Detroit educators as part of the growing movement of educators, autoworkers, dockworkers, film actors and writers, UPS drivers and others against wage cuts, speedup, social inequality and war.

We resolve to build a network of rank-and-file committees at all schools and campuses, as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), to wrest control of our struggle from the pro-corporate union bureaucracy and put rank-and-file educators in charge.

The urgency of Monday's meeting was underscored by U-M's rejection on Sunday of a GEO counteroffer to the university's contract proposal submitted August 2. The GEO counteroffer failed to address any of the core demands of the graduate students and accepted the university's wage offer of 20 percent over three years, which would mean a cut in real wages. It was the product of secret talks carried out between the GEO, the Michigan Federation of Teachers bureaucracy and Democratic Party operative Bob King.

The university summarily rejected proposals in the counteroffer for marginal improvements, such as equal pay raises for GSIs at all three Michigan campuses (Ann Arbor, Flint and Dearborn), basic measures to limit the threat of COVID-19 infections in classrooms, and an extension of summer pay to all GSIs. The university provocatively withdrew its earlier offer of a \$1,000 signing bonus.

At an online membership meeting on Tuesday, the GEO took a poll between two options. One was to accept the university's latest offer; the other was to continue negotiating for a better deal. Despite the refusal of the GEO and the AFT to mobilize the powerful support that exists among students, campus faculty and staff, as well as workers beyond the university, the GSI attendees

at the Tuesday union meeting overwhelmingly voted to reject the first option and continue the strike for their demands.

These developments vindicate the call by the Socialist Equality Party and IYSSE for the building of a rank-and-file committee to take the conduct of the strike out of the hands of the GEO and link the GSIs with the Detroit teachers, autoworkers and other workers fighting for decent wages and working conditions. We say the GSIs should demand that the firing of any striker be met with an immediate campus-wide strike by university and Michigan Medicine staff, together with the students, with a call for mass solidarity action by Detroit teachers, whose contract expires this month, and autoworkers, whose contracts with GM, Ford and Stellantis expire on September 14.

Zac Corrigan of the MEFRSC chaired the joint meeting with the IYSSE Monday night. He opened by drawing attention to the global class struggle and the breakdown of the capitalist system. Corrigan emphasized the strike's deep connection to the ongoing labor struggles around the world, including tens of thousands of striking actors and writers in the US, Canadian dockworkers, US and Canadian autoworkers, and academic workers' strikes earlier this year across the US that were betrayed by the AFT and UAW.

Luke Galvin of the IYSSE at U-M gave a report that outlined the ruthlessness of the university administration, as well as the duplicity of the GEO leadership in maneuvering behind the backs of the rank and file to prepare its sellout "counteroffer."

He also drew attention to the political forces driving the strike. "The brutality is not just that of the university administration, but the corporate elite and the two parties of big business that run the U of M."

Khara Sikhan, a teacher from Detroit and member of the MERFSC, gave a report that outlined the massive budget cuts being prepared in the Detroit Public School system in the coming year, including over \$300 million in 2023-24 alone, and the planned elimination of over 100 positions.

Highlighting the role of the Democratic Party, she drew particular attention to the social crisis facing educators and workers in general, who are being made to pay for bank bailouts and the ever-rising spending for the US-NATO proxy war with Russia in Ukraine.

Sikhan's report concluded with a list of demands advanced by the MERFSC, including a 50 percent pay raise for all Detroit educators and school workers, increased staffing, expanded funding for family programs, and the modernization of all schools, including measures to reduce potential exposure to COVID-19.

In the ensuing discussion, several important contributions were made. Members of the IYSSE chapters at both the University of Michigan and Wayne State University spoke in support of the reports and in defense of the campus strikers.

Mazin of the IYSSE at U-M said: "I've learned just as much from the GSIs as I have from my professors. They play a critical role in our education. I think it's a valuable thing to form these rank-and-file strike committees because they can help fight against the kind of cloud of misinformation around the strike that their own unions put forth. But also, the committees directly intervene in the strike itself."

Dylan, also a member of the IYSSE at U-M, added, "The AFT-

GEO organization on the University of Michigan campus does not really represent the educators. I support this call for rank-and-file committees so they can get their demands. As we've seen numerous times with the AFT, demands are compromised, and there has been no progress for educators, not just in Michigan but around the country."

He emphasized the centrality of the class issues in the struggle. "This struggle at U-M and in Detroit is comparable to what's happening with the actors and writers in Hollywood and with what's happening with autoworkers everywhere. That's the perspective of the IYSSE—these struggles should be linked up, among the youth and working class internationally. That is what we prioritize—the worker—first and foremost."

Jacob, a member of the IYSSE at Wayne State University in Detroit, spoke of his recent experiences helping campaign to put Detroit Public School teachers in touch with autoworkers about their common struggles. He said, "The difference between what the IYSSE and the DSA does is that we want to link up struggles, while they try and keep them all separate."

Elsewhere in the discussion, a Michigan Medicine healthcare worker expressed his support for the strike and his growing anger that his own AFT local—one of five such AFT-affiliated locals on the campus and in the hospital—has never even proposed any kind of solidarity action with the grad students during the strike.

Derek, a retired educator, expressed his support for the striking graduate students but was concerned over how the demands advanced at the meeting could be realistically achieved. He asked: "Has this organization calculated what the total cost of meeting these demands to the university would be? And where they would perhaps get the money?"

Several attendees spoke to this question, highlighting that the university has assets of close to \$20 billion, according to its own financial reports, while a 60 percent increase in wages for all GSIs, the initial demand of the GEO would cost approximately \$88 million, less than 4 percent of the university's assets. Others pointed to the unlimited trillions made available by both political parties for war and bank bailouts, while they imposed regressive student loans and poverty wages on educators. It was also pointed out that U-M President Santa Ono makes nearly \$1 million a year, equivalent to the current salaries of roughly 40 GSIs.

One of the attendees, speaking of the university's priorities, pointed to the university's intimate links to the US military and national security apparatus, as exemplified by its recent sponsorship of leading anti-Russia warmonger Lt. Alexander Vindman's visit to the campus.



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