

GEO calls meeting to browbeat grad students into accepting sellout contract

U-M strikers: Vote no on contract betrayal! Form a rank-and-file strike committee to expand the struggle!

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On August 17, the leadership of the Graduate Employees Organization (GEO) at the University of Michigan (U-M), an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), sent a message to the 1,300 striking graduate student instructors (GSIs) making clear that both the union bureaucracy and the U-M administration are moving swiftly to impose a sellout contract before the start of the fall semester on August 28.

According to the letter, the GEO leadership previously sent a message to U-M's Human Relations (HR) department stating its intent to resolve the contract dispute before August 28.

The GEO leadership announced a general membership meeting for Monday, August 21 at which it will hold a vote on any counteroffer the university presents by that time.

A portion of the GEO memo reads:

At yesterday's [August 16] bargaining session, we communicated to HR that we would like to come to a settlement before the beginning of the Fall semester, but that doing so would require the Administration to provide a serious response to our Week of Discussion counteroffer. HR developed a counter during the session, which included only minor movement toward us.

On the university's HR website, the administration presented the "key components of the university's comprehensive package and tentative agreements" with the GEO. According to the website, the GEO and university plan to meet on August 20 for a further bargaining session.

The listed components, which meet none of the strikers' core demands, provide a snapshot of the U-M's best and final offer, which the GEO leadership plans to place before the membership on Monday.

At the onset of the strike in late March, the GEO called for a salary increase of 60 percent, improved childcare and healthcare benefits, and safe working conditions, with protection from COVID-19 infection. U-M GSIs currently receive a poverty wage of \$24,000 per year.

The union leadership has abandoned all of the demands for which the grad student workers have struck and sacrificed for nearly four months, under conditions where the AFT, which has hundreds of millions of dollars in assets, has refused to provide a penny in strike pay.

The GEO/AFT's drive to force a return to work on the basis of a contract dictated by the university takes place under conditions where the U-M administration is threatening to fire any GSIs and graduate student staff assistants (GSSAs) who fail to return to work when the new term begins on August 28.

U-M President Santa Ono, whose annual salary is close to \$1 million, and the wealthy Democratic Party supporters who control the Board of Regents, have been enabled in their strikebreaking by the deliberate isolation of the strikers by the GEO leaders and AFT bureaucracy, who have refused to mobilize the powerful support for the grad students that exists among students, faculty and other U-M staff, including AFT members.

The GEO has accepted the university's offer of a mere 20 percent wage increase over three years for GSIs at the Ann Arbor campus, which will mean a further decline in real wages. The administration continues to insist on even smaller wage increases for GEO members at the Dearborn

and Flint campuses.

The GEO in its letter acknowledges that the university has not offered any significant improvements over previous proposals on healthcare, childcare and working conditions. There remain no plans for protection against COVID-19 amid a surge of cases across the US that will likely worsen as millions of children and students return to school this fall.

Why is the GEO leadership calling a meeting to hold yet another vote on essentially the same university offer that was overwhelmingly rejected by workers at the last membership meeting, held less than two weeks ago?

On August 7, U-M Provost Lurie McCauley posted a statement reiterating the threat to terminate and replace any graduate workers who fail to report for work on August 28. Additionally, the notice stated that workers “not fulfilling their job duties will not receive their stipend for any period during which they are not completing their duties.” McCauley demanded that course syllabuses and plans be fully completed by August 28, or returning GSIs would be docked pay. She added the requirement that GSIs submit “weekly online forms attesting that they have completed their work duties.”

In other words, the university is demanding that the GEO/AFT force the strikers to accept its contract offer and end the walkout well in advance of August 28.

A major factor in the university’s brutal position is its fear, and that of the Biden administration and the ruling class as a whole, that the struggle of the GSIs will merge with the growing wave of working class strikes and rebellions against the trade union bureaucracy. On August 20, a contract extension for nearly 3,000 Detroit Public School teachers expires, leaving them without a contract for the fall semester, which begins on August 28.

With tens of thousands of actors and writers on strike, UPS workers voting on a sellout contract and 170,000 autoworkers in the US and Canada prepared to strike when their current contracts expire next month, the ruling elite and its political representatives and college administrators face the prospect of a massive eruption of working class struggle.

The GEO is dominated politically by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), a pseudo-left faction of the Democratic Party. It has been working, behind the backs of the rank-and-file strikers, with the Michigan AFT and former United Auto Workers president and Democratic Party operative Bob King to impose a settlement in line with the demands of the university.

The GSIs should reject the sellout contract that will be presented to them on Monday. But voting down the contract is only the first step.

We urge the GSIs to form a rank-and-file committee to mobilize staff, faculty, medical workers at Michigan

Medicine and students to broaden the strike and take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands. It must be made clear that any move by the university to fire strikers or dock their pay will be met with a campus-wide shutdown and a call for autoworkers, public school teachers and Teamsters to join the struggle.

A joint meeting of the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (MERFSC) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at U-M and Wayne State University held August 14 adopted a resolution calling 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 suggest the GSIs adopt the following contract demands:

- 1) A first-year wage increase of 60 percent
- 2) A substantial increase in healthcare insurance coverage in all areas
- 4) At least 12 weeks of paid time off for paternity/maternity leave alongside increased provisions for childcare for workers with children
- 4) Equal pay among all graduate workers across U-M’s three campuses, with raises for Dearborn and Flint workers to bring them to par with Ann Arbor graduate worker salaries
- 5) The resumption of picketing and withholding of grades until the GSIs receive a contract meeting these demands
- 6) The calling of a total campus-wide strike of staff, faculty, Michigan Medicine workers and GSIs with the support of undergrad students in the event U-M takes any retaliatory measures against strikers, such as docking pay or termination

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



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