

GEO/AFT holds vote to ratify university-dictated contract

U-M grad student workers: Vote “No” on sellout contract! Form a rank-and-file committee to unite with Detroit teachers, autoworkers and win a living wage!

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Register now to attend our online meeting on Saturday, August 26, 1 pm, EDT. To join the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee, fill out the form at the end of this article.

The Graduate Employees’ Organization (GEO), an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) at the University of Michigan, announced Tuesday morning that striking graduate student instructors (GSIs) had voted to proceed to a ratification vote based on the latest contract offer from the university.

At a membership meeting the previous night, the GEO leadership endorsed the sellout contract. They cited the university’s threat to fire GSIs who fail to return to work by the opening of the fall term on August 28, as well as the refusal of the AFT to give strike pay and a lack of solidarity action by other AFT locals at U-M—in all of which the GEO leadership is fully complicit—to argue that the workers, on strike since March 29, have no alternative but to accept the contract offer and end the walkout.

This is a lie! There is broad support for the striking grad student instructors among students as well as U-M faculty and staff, not to mention Detroit educators, autoworkers and other sections of workers entering into struggle. This support can and must be mobilized to defeat the university’s strikebreaking and secure a living wage for those who do most of the teaching at the university.

Any attempt by the university to fire strikers or dock their pay must be met with a campus-wide strike by students and staff, backed by solidarity action from Detroit educators, also fighting a sellout contract, and autoworkers whose contracts expire next month. To carry out this fight, it is necessary for the GSIs to form a rank-and-file committee to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the treacherous GEO/AFT bureaucracy. Such committees are being formed among Detroit teachers, autoworkers, UPS workers and many other sections of workers in the US and internationally.

It is also necessary to recognize that this is not only a fight against the university administration, but also a political struggle against the Democratic Party, which controls the U-M Board of Regents, and the bipartisan policies of war and austerity of the US corporate elite.

In the face of the university’s strikebreaking tactics and the isolation of the strike by the GEO leadership, which is politically dominated by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), a fake “left” faction of

the Democratic Party, many grad student workers at the Monday night meeting denounced the union’s capitulation and argued for a continuation of the struggle.

They pointed to the hundreds of GEO members, including instructors at the Dearborn and Flint campuses, who will not even receive the inadequate wage increase of 20 percent over three years offered to GSIs and Graduate Student Staff Assistants (GSSAs) at the main campus, located in Ann Arbor.

GSIs at U-M currently make an average of only \$24,000 a year, well below the poverty level. An increase of 20 percent, even assuming it is not totally eaten up by inflation, will only raise the average nominal wage to about \$28,800 after three years. This is being touted by GEO leaders as a “historic win” and a “living wage.”

Also on Tuesday, the GEO launched an online vote on the tentative agreement, to be completed by 12:01 am on Friday. The union said it would hold a press advisory on Friday to announce the results of the ratification vote.

The entire process is a travesty of democracy. Union members had not seen the actual text of the contract. In announcing that the Monday night meeting had voted to move to ratification, the GEO failed to provide the vote count.

The tentative agreement from the university does not come close to the demands the GEO put forward at the beginning of the strike, which it claimed were necessary for graduate students to get by. The union initially called for a 60 percent wage increase in the first year, plus expanded paid leave for child care, improved healthcare benefits, and protection against COVID infection. It quickly dropped the 60 percent wage demand, despite mass protests by students in support of the strike, and is now pushing a deal that does not guarantee 12 weeks of paid parental leave for workers with newly born children, or any significant improvements on the other basic issues.

Nor does the contract provide back pay for the strikers, whose salary for April was docked by the U-M administration in retaliation for the strike. Instead, it only includes a \$1,000 signing bonus, far less than the lost pay. The bonus does not even apply to grad student strikers who are not scheduled to work as instructors in the coming term.

In response to a Twitter post Tuesday by the *Michigan Daily* announcing the GEO ratification process, one striker wrote: “Some

members were 'unsure if the University's final offer sufficiently met their demands.' No, y'all. I'm sure it didn't. Also, if you think the new, tiered funding system that leaves 30-40 percent of GSIs making only about 65 percent of a living wage is a 'big win,' I don't know what to say."

What does the proposed contract provide?

- Besides the entirely inadequate wage offer of 20 percent at the Ann Arbor campus, the university flatly rejected workers' demands for pay parity at all three U-M campuses.

- The "Rackham Plan," launched in March before the strike and promising summer funding for graduate students, excludes hundreds of students outside of Rackham Graduate School, including master students and PhD students in their later years.

- The contract includes "up to 12 weeks" of paid parental leave, leaving in question a guaranteed minimum of paid leave.

- Mental health co-pays are reduced by only \$50.

- The university rejected a demand voted for by the strikers that GSIs have the right to mandate masks in classrooms as well as air filters, despite the upsurge of COVID infections and the spread of new and virulent variants.

Also on Monday night, while the GEO was telling its members they had to accept the university's contract offer and end their strike, the leadership of the Detroit Federation of Teachers was holding a snap meeting to impose a one-year contract the educators had not even seen. The AFT bureaucracy and its Democratic Party allies are terrified of the prospect of united strike action by U-M grad students and Detroit teachers, under conditions where UPS workers are voting against a sellout contract, tens of thousands of actors and writers remain on strike against the entertainment monopolies, and autoworkers in the US and Canada are ready to strike next month against the Detroit Three companies.

The union bureaucracies are working hand in glove with the Biden administration and the Michigan Democratic Party to end strikes that are in progress and block new walkouts.

The contract being hailed by the GEO leadership is virtually identical to the one put forward by the university on August 2, which the membership overwhelmingly rejected. All of the various proposals and counterproposals from the past few weeks, as revealed by a leaked email from the Lecturers' Employee Organization (LEO), another affiliate of the AFT at U-M, are the products of a conspiracy carried out behind the backs of the GEO rank-and-file by the GEO leadership, the DSA, the Michigan Federation of Teachers and former UAW President and current LEO member Bob King, a major player in the state Democratic Party, to work out with the university the terms of the sellout contract and end the strike.

This collusion was further exposed in the campus-wide email sent out on Sunday by U-M Provost Laurie McCauley, laying out the main provisions of the university's "final" contract offer. McCauley is the author of an earlier letter threatening to fire any GSIs or GSSAs who fail to return to work by next Monday, and to dock the pay of instructors who do return but without having completed their course syllabuses and other preparatory course work.

She concluded her letter on Sunday with a pat on the head for the GEO leadership, stating: "I respect the work, tenacity and organization it requires for a union to run and complete a successful negotiation." This can be roughly translated as: "I understand and appreciate the complex work you (the DSA-dominated GEO leadership) do in deceiving, disorganizing and undermining the rank and file in order to impose the sellout we have dictated."

Dylan, the president of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at U-M, issued the following statement:

What the GEO leadership has asked the grad students to vote on is a spit in the face. The 60 percent pay increase in the first year of the contract is a necessity. GEO members need a rank-and-file committee to continue their fight. The student body, faculty and university employees have expressed support throughout the strike. Now the university is threatening to fire the grad students. They cannot be left to face that alone. It's time for the staff and students and other workers to close ranks around the GSIs.

One worker at U-M told the *World Socialist Web Site*:

I think it is horrendous that students paying an exorbitant amount in tuition are being taught by grad students barely making the minimum wage. Workers are making more at McDonald's. Tuition is high while grad students are making \$12 an hour. GSIs are being pushed into a corner by the GEO to take a deal way below expectations. I feel like every employee will open their eyes and support this cause. GSIs should reject the settlement.

We urge the graduate student workers to vote down the sellout contract and take part in the joint public meeting of the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality at U-M to be held this Saturday at 1 PM.



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