

GEO ratifies sellout contract at University of Michigan, calls off strike

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On Friday morning, the Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO), an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) at the University of Michigan (U-M), announced the ratification of a tentative contract, officially ending the five-month strike by 1,300 graduate student instructors (GSIs) and staff assistants (GSSAs) for a living wage and improved working conditions.

The current average pay of GSIs, who teach 90 percent of undergrad classes at U-M, is \$24,000 a year, well below the poverty level. The new contract fails to provide a living wage, granting total wage increases of 20 percent over three years for grad student workers at the main campus in Ann Arbor, and only 10.5 percent for GSIs and GSSAs at the Dearborn campus. Wage increases at the Flint campus will only bring the grad workers up to the lower-scale wages of Dearborn grad workers.

The contract provides only marginal improvements in healthcare and parental leave benefits, rejects the workers' demand for pay parity across all campuses, and rejects demands for mandatory masking and air filtration in classrooms to protect against COVID-19 infection.

The GEO/AFT, which is politically dominated by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), a pseudo-left faction of the Democratic Party, used the university's threat to fire strikers who fail to return to work by the start of the fall term on Monday, August 28, to browbeat the student workers into accepting the university-dictated sellout contract.

The DSA-aligned GEO leaders had systematically isolated the strikers, refusing to call out the AFT bureaucracy for failing to mobilize its other members at U-M and the university's Michigan Medicine hospital

system, as well as the AFT's failure to provide strike pay and its liquidation of campus strikes at Rutgers and in Illinois last spring.

Earlier this month, a joint letter to the membership of the AFT-affiliated Lecturer Employees Organization (LEO) at U-M from LEO President Kirsten Herold and former AFT Michigan President David Hecker was posted on Reddit. The letter revealed that in late June, the GEO approached the LEO and Michigan AFT leadership, as well as former UAW President Bob King, a member of the LEO and major figure in the state Democratic Party, to intercede with the university to work out a contract that would be imposed on the GEO membership before the start of the fall term.

This was done behind the backs of the striking GEO members. It amounted to a conspiracy between the DSA, the AFT, the Democratic Party and the university to ram through a sellout contract and end the strike. In early August, the university issued its threat of mass firings of strikers and submitted a new contract offer on August 2. At a GEO membership meeting on August 3, student workers spoke out against the contract and the strikebreaking context in which it was put forward.

Over the past week, the GEO pushed through essentially the same contract, telling the workers that they had no choice but to accept it because they were isolated and without strike pay—both the result of the GEO's own policies.

In fact, even at that late date, had the GEO made a call for students and staff to respond to the firing or pay-docking of GSIs with a campus-wide strike and a call for solidarity action by Detroit teachers and autoworkers, themselves in the midst of bitter contract fights, such a call would have received a powerful response.

The GEO leadership could not and would not do that, because it, and the DSA, are tools of the big business Democratic Party, an imperialist party of war and

austerity.

Along with concealing their maneuvers with the AFT and the Democrats from the rank-and-file student workers, the GEO officials have shamelessly lied about the contract itself, touting it as a historic “win” for the strikers.

On Friday, the union reported that the contract had been approved by 97 percent of the workers who participated in the ratification vote. Even if one assumes that the reported tally is legitimate—the workers had no oversight of the vote count—the vote is not an expression of mass support for the deal or confidence in the union leadership. Those workers who have been taken in by GEO’s grossly distorted and inflated characterization of the contract and its “gains” will soon enough be disabused, intensifying anger and disgust with the GEO/AFT apparatus.

Amir Fleischmann, a GEO officer and DSA member, lied in a Twitter/X post that the contract provided an “80% raise for most PhDs.” He was including as part of the contract’s pay raises the university’s “Rackham plan” to extend funding for some PhD students to the summer months. What he dared not say was how many graduate students workers were left out—Dearborn and Flint students, students outside of Rackham Graduate School, PhD students in their later years, master’s students, just to name a few. Moreover, the “Rackham plan” is not even part of the actual contract but only a side letter.

The fraud of a union “victory” was exposed at a rally called by the GEO Friday afternoon on the Ann Arbor campus. The union leaders made a call for members to turn out en masse to celebrate their supposed triumph over the U-M administration and Board of Regents. Fewer than 40 people showed up in all, including the union officers.

A reporter for the *World Socialist Web Site* asked how the new contract, virtually the same as the university’s August 2 offer, could be called a “huge victory.” Fleischman claimed that the new contract had “huge differences” that were “major victories,” but was compelled to admit that at least half of the membership was excluded from the Rackham Plan and would only receive a 20 percent wage increase.

When asked why the GEO did not inform the membership that it had initiated talks in June with the LEO, Michigan AFT and Bob King to work out a deal with the university before the resumption of classes for the fall term, GEO President Jared Eno evaded the question and claimed that the union had “fought every step of the way” against the university’s “desire to settle this out of sight.”

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at U-M has throughout the strike fought to mobilize support for the strikers and warned the rank-and-file student workers of the treachery of the GEO/AFT/DSA leadership. The IYSSE urged the workers to form a rank-and-file committee to take control of the strike from the pro-Democratic Party leadership and link up with Detroit teachers, autoworkers, UPS workers and other sections of the working class entering into struggle, many of whom are forming rank-and-file committees to coordinate their struggles, abolish the union bureaucracies and establish rank-and-file control.

Mazin, an IYSSE member at U-M, supported the call for a rank-and-file committee, linked to a political perspective to mobilize the working class independently of the two parties of the ruling class and in opposition to the war in Ukraine and the war preparations against China. He told the WWS: “If the teachers of Detroit and the GSIs unify to form a rank-and-file committee, their voices will be overpoweringly loud and will undermine the ability of the DSA leadership to subordinate education to the drive for war.”

With the imposition of the sellout contract, the struggle of student workers at U-M and more broadly enters a new phase. The lessons of this betrayal must be drawn. The building of rank-and-file power must be combined with the fight to free the working class from the Democratic Party and mobilize it on the basis of a socialist program against war, austerity and the drive toward dictatorship.

We urge graduate students at U-M to take part in the joint meeting of the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee and the IYSSE at U-M and Wayne State University that will be held on Saturday, August 26, at 1:00 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time.



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