

U-M grad student instructor: “I was pro-union all my life, but this was too much of a sellout.”

Joint meeting of Michigan educators’ rank and file committee and IYSSE opposes double betrayal by AFT-affiliated unions

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On Saturday, August 26, the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (MERFSC) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at the University of Michigan and Wayne State University in Detroit held a joint meeting. The event was held in the wake of sellout contracts imposed by unions affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) at both U-M and the Detroit public school system.

Detroit teachers and U-M graduate student instructors denounced the contracts rammed through by the leaderships of the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) and the U-M Graduate Employees’ Organization (GEO). In both cases, the union officials conspired behind the backs of the rank and file to impose contracts dictated by management, and then cynically hailed the agreements as “historic victories.”

The GEO is politically dominated by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), a pseudo-left, pro-imperialist faction of the Democratic Party. On Friday, August 25, the union officially announced the end of the five-month strike by 1,300 graduate student instructors (GSIs) and graduate student staff assistants (GSSAs) on the basis of a deal that maintains poverty wages for grad student workers as well as vast pay disparities across U-M’s three campuses—Ann Arbor, Dearborn and Flint.

The DSA-dominated leadership claimed the tentative agreement had been ratified by a margin of 97 percent. What it did not explain was its role in isolating the strikers and telling them they had to accept the deal before the beginning of the fall term on Monday, August 28, under conditions where the university had announced it would fire any grad instructors or assistants who failed to return to work by then. At a membership meeting held to discuss the university’s “last and final offer,” the GEO officers claimed the strikers

had virtually no support from students or other workers—a blatant lie!

The same day, the leaders of the Detroit Federation of Teachers announced the ratification of a concessions-laden contract for 4,300 teachers and workers at the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD). The deal, negotiated behind the backs of the educators, accepts \$300 million in budget cuts and up to 300 job eliminations, while providing pay raises—below the rate of inflation—only for those already at the top of the pay scale.

The situation remains politically explosive as students return to classrooms this week amid a new surge of the pandemic, both at U-M and Michigan’s largest K-12 district in Detroit.

Opening the meeting, MERFSC member and *World Socialist Web Site* writer Zac Corrigan placed the discussion within the context of the national and international resurgence of the working class, driven by the mounting economic, political and social crisis of capitalism in the US and around the world. The Biden administration and the Democrats claimed there was “no money” for schools, measures to protect the working class against COVID, protection from the ravages of climate change—wildfires, floods, hurricanes—or falling living standards for workers amid historic levels of social inequality. But there were unlimited funds for war against Russia in Ukraine, the preparation for a bigger war against China and endless bailouts of bankers and speculators.

With autoworkers in the US and Canada eager to take on the auto bosses when their contracts expire in two weeks and join with actors and writers on strike against the studio moguls, the ruling class and Biden were relying more than ever on the trade union bureaucracies to undermine the

workers and keep them divided. Hence the simultaneous sellouts of Detroit teachers and U-M grad workers. Likewise the urgent need to form a national and international network of rank-and-file committees independent of the union apparatuses and the parties of big business—the fascistic Republicans and the war-mongering Democrats, and their counterparts around the world—and build a new leadership in the working class to fight for socialism.

The first worker to speak in the discussion, Laurel, a U-M grad student instructor, expressed her outrage and disgust over the betrayal carried out by the GEO and AFT leadership.

“I was really pro-union at the beginning of this strike and have been all my life,” she said. “But I’m not anymore. I think this was just too much of a sellout. I don’t know enough about other unions, but I don’t have any faith in the GEO leadership anymore.”

Pointing to the outright lies spread by the GEO to promote the contract, she said: “The GEO in their press release, in their comments to *Inside Higher Ed*, in their social media posts, claim to have gotten an 80 percent raise for workers, or sometimes they’ll say, ‘most PhD students’ instead of workers.”

In fact, as she explained, the extension by U-M of funding for some PhD students to the summer months, the so-called “Rackham Plan,” was not a wage increase and was not part of the contract, and it covered only a fraction of GSIs. She was particularly disgusted by the abandonment of the demand for equal pay for grad student workers at all U-M campuses. The new contract includes a 20 percent pay increase over three years for GSIs at the Ann Arbor campus, leaving these workers below the poverty wage level, and only 10.5 percent for workers at the Dearborn campus.

Joe, a worker in the university’s Michigan Medicine hospital system, said, “The AFT provided very little support to the GEO, even though we are both in the AFT. It was just a petition. When I asked what else we could do, the union had no answer. The GEO strike is the writing on the wall for all of the other unions.”

Luke, a member of the IYSSE at U-M, explained in some detail how the GEO/AFT officials conspired to work out a deal with the university and get the strikers back to work before the start of the fall semester. This included, in late June, secretly asking the Michigan AFT and former UAW president Bob King, a member of the AFT lecturers’ union local on campus, to intercede with the U-M administration. The result was a new offer by the university on August 2, coupled with the threat of mass firings of strikers. The deal pushed through last week was virtually identical to the August 2 proposal.

Khara, a Detroit public school teacher and member of the

MERFSC, explained how the DFT leadership extended the expired contract until the week before the opening of school, and then sprung the tentative agreement on the membership, giving them an ultimatum: Either vote for the deal or forgo any wage increase or bonus. The DFT excluded any possibility of a strike, enforcing Michigan’s prohibition on teachers’ strikes upheld by their Democratic Party allies who control the state government.

Concluding her remarks, she said, “The entire experience demonstrates that the bureaucracy is impervious to pressure from below. Instead, workers have to organize a rebellion against the apparatus in the DFT, AFT and other unions and develop rank-and-file structures that return control to the shop floor, where it belongs.”

Terry, an educator and member of the Ontario Educators Rank and File Committee, said, “I endorse this meeting. Teachers in our province face the same issues as here in Detroit. In Ontario, they divided us up. We have four different teachers unions. Then the staff is in another union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees. All our contracts expire at the same time, but CUPE threw us under the bus in order to divide and conquer.

“Last November, we walked out. Ontario Premier Doug Ford, an admirer of Donald Trump, tried to criminalize our strike. The union called it a ‘political protest.’ Ford demanded massive cuts to living standards and the union negotiated the ‘terms of surrender.’ The government was fearful of a general strike.”

David, the president of the IYSSE at Wayne State University, said, “Teachers’ concerns about the disparity in compensation for educators versus the amount of money flushing around the capitalist class are valid and expose the flaws in the current system. It’s unjust that educators are not being properly compensated for their crucial contribution to society. This is by design, to undercut public education.

“Joining the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees means joining a fighting organization for educators to sharpen their politics and create a plan of action with other workers, who all face the same exploitation under capitalism. The current struggle for fair compensation resonates beyond the education sector. It’s about the broader movement for workers’ rights and for social equality.”



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