

University of Michigan lecturers' union holds rally to build support for contract fight

Barry Grey
19 March 2024

Some 200 University of Michigan (U-M) employees and supporters attended a rally on Saturday, March 16 at the main campus in Ann Arbor in support of non-tenure track lecturers who are in the midst of contract negotiations with the university. The lecturers are members of the Lecturers' Employee Organization (LEO), Local 6244 of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).

The LEO is the bargaining agent for lecturers at the Dearborn and Flint campuses as well as the main campus in Ann Arbor. Bargaining on a new three-year contract to replace the current contract, which expires on April 20, officially began last October.

Leaders of a number of unions at U-M besides the LEO addressed the crowd, including the Graduate Employees Organization (GEO) and the United Michigan Medicine Allied Professionals (UMMAP).

The lecturers do most of the teaching at the university and many have a Masters degree or even a PhD. But they are highly exploited and poorly paid. Their minimum annual salary is \$51,000.

According to the LEO website, wage increases under the expiring contract fell far behind inflation: "Our last 3 years of annual raises add up to 8.25 percent, whereas inflation over that same time period was 17.2 percent." This adds up to a cumulative cut in real wages of 8.95 percent.

The LEO's official proposal calls for annual increases of \$8,000 in year one, \$7,000 in year two, and \$6,000 in year three. The union is also calling for longevity increases for lecturers with over 10 years of service and improved job security.

The only basis for winning these demands is the mobilization of the entire university workforce, U-M students, public school educators in Detroit as well as Ann Arbor, Dearborn and Flint, and the powerful

sections of industrial workers in the area, particularly the autoworkers. The university, which has an endowment of over \$17 billion and over the past decade has operated with \$280-\$750 million in excess cash flows, is seeking to break parity on the minimum salary at the three campuses and is offering lecturers at the Dearborn campus an insulting 1.5 percent increase, which means a further cut in real wages.

Such a fight means a direct clash with Democratic Party Governor Gretchen Whitmer and the Biden administration and a rebellion against AFT President Randi Weingarten and the AFT apparatus in Michigan, which at U-M is headed by LEO President Kirsten Herold, who is also the secretary-treasurer of the Michigan AFT.

These forces combined last year, with the support of the Democratic Socialist of America (DSA)-dominated leadership of the Graduate Students Organization (GEO) at U-M, to isolate a five-month strike by the graduate students and force through a sellout contract before the beginning of the fall term in late August of 2023. When the university threatened to fire the striking grad students if they did not accept its terms and end the walkout before the start of the fall semester, the GEO pushed through, with virtually no advance notice and without allowing the membership to read the tentative agreement, a contract that was in all essentials dictated by the university.

It turned out that behind the backs of the striking GEO members, the GEO leadership in late June of 2023 had approached the LEO and Michigan AFT, along with former United Auto Workers (UAW) President and LEO member Bob King, a leading operative in the state Democratic Party, to intercede with the university and work out a contract deal to be imposed on the GEO rank-and-file before the start of

the fall term.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at U-M opposed this betrayal and fought for the striking grad students to establish a rank-and-file committee to wrest control of the strike from the GEO and AFT leadership and link up with Detroit teachers, the Big Three autoworkers and the UPS workers, all of whom were in bitter contract struggles.

The same issues are front and center in the contract fight of the lecturers. At last Saturday's rally, none of the speakers, which included LEO President Herold, even mentioned the reactionary spectacle of the 2024 elections, where the "choice" being presented by the two big business parties is between the fascist Trump and the war criminal Biden, amidst increasingly brutal attacks on democratic rights by both capitalist parties.

Nat Leach, co-coordinator of the Young Democratic Socialists of America (YDSA) at U-M, was the most vocal promoter of the union bureaucracy. Leach hailed the "historic" UAW contract and UAW President Shawn Fain, who worked hand-in-glove with Biden to stage a "stand-up strike" that allowed the auto companies to keep production going and profits flowing, and then imposed a sellout contract that opened the floodgates to mass layoffs. Leach presented the pro-Fain United Auto Workers for Democracy (UAWD), as well as the Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), which promoted Trump ally Sean O'Brien as a "progressive," as models to be emulated.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to Ryan, a lecturer and LEO member at the Ann Arbor campus, about the issues in the contract fight. Ryan said:

In the last contract, 2021, we fought real hard and got parity for base salaries across the three campuses. The people in Flint and Dearborn actually have heavier teaching loads than we do and bigger course loads. The Ann Arbor lecturers agreed to forgo big gains for the sake of solidarity. We didn't get anything in base wages or longevity wages. We got three percent a year in order to bring the others up to our level.

Now the university says it just cannot keep up with that because Flint and Dearborn aren't making enough and they have their separate

budgets, not the same. They want to break parity.

But their chancellors are all paid out of Ann Arbor money. The chancellor at Dearborn, Domenico Grasso, just got a 22 percent raise of almost \$106,000. Deba Dutta, the outgoing chancellor at Flint, just left with a \$700,000 parachute. Dearborn and Flint are offering just 2 percent to the lecturers.

I teach English. I teach 18 students in each class. Just the students in my classes generate \$480,000 in tuition for the university. I get paid just over \$50,000.

We could barely buy a \$280,000 house in Ypsilanti. For the past five years, my wife and I and our two kids have been living in a 750 square-foot house in Ypsi. None of us can afford to live in Ann Arbor.

Our contract expires on April 20, and then we have a 30-day window before there can be any job actions. We would not be able to strike until the summer.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact