

As University of Michigan cracks down on protesters, AFT-affiliated lecturers' union blocks strike, signs sellout tentative contract

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On April 23, three days after their contract had expired, University of Michigan (U-M) lecturers voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike. But the last thing the leadership of the Lecturers' Employee Organization (LEO) wanted was a work stoppage.

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT)-affiliated union, the bargaining agent for the university's 1,800 non-tenure track lecturers, refused to authorize a walkout and instead initialed a tentative agreement on April 26. The deal sells out the fight for a livable wage and pay parity across U-M's three campuses (Ann Arbor, Dearborn and Flint). Other provisions have not been made public.

According to the union, the TA includes base salary increases of 8 percent, 6 percent, 6 percent and 5 percent over the next four years for lecturers on the Ann Arbor campus. At UM-Flint and UM-Dearborn, lecturers receive only 3 percent base salary increases in each of the contract's four years, with lump sum payments of 3 percent in the first year, 2 percent in the second year and \$1,000 in the final year.

The lecturers have been fighting unsuccessfully for years to obtain a living wage. They earn between \$57,000 and \$89,000 per year, while bearing huge responsibilities for the education of students. The University of Michigan has an endowment now estimated at some \$18 billion and charges about \$60,000 a year for out-of-state students.

These wage bumps—which will be largely eaten up by current and future inflation and do not compensate for past losses in real wages—are an insult to hard-pressed educators who have faced years of record inflation and soaring childcare expenses. Lecturers also demanded a reduction in course loads, increased professional

development and pay parity between the Ann Arbor, Flint and Dearborn campuses.

The rushed settlement was a political decision. It was imposed by the U-M administration and the LEO leadership in a joint effort to prevent a strike under conditions of growing student protests against the genocide in Gaza in the US and internationally, including at the University of Michigan.

The U-M campuses have been convulsed by pro-Palestinian protests for months. On April 22, students set up an encampment on the Ann Arbor campus' central "Diag" in solidarity with Columbia University students and thousands of other protesters who are being slandered as "antisemites" by the Biden administration and the Republicans, suspended and expelled by university administrations, and attacked and arrested by the police.

At U-M, the encampment is in direct defiance of a new "anti-disruption" policy recently announced by President Santa Ono and the Board of Regents, which amounts to a de facto ban on protests.

Following an informational picket Last Friday, lecturers paid a visit to protesting students on the "Diag" to show their support. At the encampment, the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to one lecturer about the fight to mobilize the working class against war and social inequality, including by calling a general strike.

She said:

I'd absolutely support that. The working class has a significant amount of power. Their labor moves the war machine, and if they stop, they can stop the machine.

The LEO includes lecturers and librarians, archivists and curators spread across the three U-M campuses. According to the union, the strike authorization vote at the Flint and Dearborn campuses was over 90 percent, and over 75 percent in Ann Arbor.

The decision to prevent a strike was clearly political and came from the top. AFT President Randi Weingarten has become a key spokesperson for the Biden administration's attacks on anti-genocide protesters and has, for decades, helped impose low wages, poor working conditions and under-staffing on educators.

This week, as mounted police attacked students at the University of Texas and police around the country threw faculty members to the ground and arrested hundreds of students, Weingarten legitimized the attacks by denouncing the protesters as "antisemites."

The AFT is giving its full backing to Biden's "ironclad" defense of Israeli genocide as well as to record US military spending, escalating war against Russia in Ukraine and war preparations against China and Iran. Weingarten and the trade union bureaucracy as a whole are enlisting in the government drive to impose austerity on workers at home and suppress working class opposition to the war policy of US imperialism.

Kirsten Herold, LEO president at the Ann Arbor campus, is also the secretary-treasurer of the Michigan AFT. Already prior to announcing the tentative agreement, Herold made clear that the union would block any mobilization of U-M educators, which could serve as an example to faculty and staff at campuses across the country where students are being attacked and expelled for exercising their right to free speech and political expression.

She told the *Michigan Daily*, "I wouldn't expect mass picketing, like I wouldn't expect picketing for people to go take their exams, for example."

Calling a "presence" on campus "possible," Herold said a rally might be feasible. "But I wouldn't expect it because it's a great struggle because teaching is over. I wouldn't expect to see pickets at every door on campus."

Herold and the LEO played a similarly treacherous role one year ago in the months-long strike by graduate student instructors, members of the Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO), also affiliated with

the AFT. GEO members struck for a 60 percent pay increase in the first year of their three-year contract. This was the bare minimum to bring the graduate workers anywhere close to a living wage.

But the GEO leadership, controlled by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and working in tandem with LEO President Herold and the AFT, secretly worked out a sellout deal with the university and pushed it through, at short notice and with no time for the rank and file to study the tentative agreement, just before the resumption of classes following the summer break.

In blocking a strike by the lecturers, the LEO leadership is acting as an agency of Biden and the Democratic Party. The AFT is well aware that Michigan is a key battleground state in the presidential election and that "Genocide Joe" is hated by growing numbers of voters, especially young people.

Lecturers at UM should reject this deal and launch strike action to win a livable wage, with parity across campuses. They should link their strike to the demand to end US support for the fascist Netanyahu government and US-Israeli genocide against the Palestinians, as well as an end to police repression of students and educators on campuses throughout the country.

This requires a rank-and-file rebellion against the pro-war, pro-capitalist union bureaucracy and the building of rank-and-file committees to unite the struggles of educators in the US and internationally.

The lecturers are urged to join the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee.



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