

University of Michigan lecturers' union blocks strike in order to isolate anti-genocide protesters

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Voting by lecturers at the University of Michigan finishes today on a tentative contract agreement entered into by the Lecturers' Employee Organization (LEO). The tentative contract is a betrayal of the demands of nearly 1,800 lecturers seeking to make up for years of high inflation and pay disparity across three campuses.

The nontenured-track lecturers, who teach most of the freshman students, voted overwhelmingly two weeks ago to authorize a strike. The vote was more than 95 percent in favor of a strike on the Dearborn and Flint campuses and 75 percent in Ann Arbor.

The LEO and its parent union, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), were terrified of calling a strike amid growing unrest among students at all three UM campuses, particularly at the central Ann Arbor campus, where students have set up an encampment to protest the genocide in Gaza. Despite savage repression by Michigan State Police, who used pepper spray against students and made multiple arrests last week, the students have continued their campus occupation.

The AFT—headed by the multimillionaire Zionist and member of the Democratic National Committee Randi Weingarten—is wholly subservient to the Democratic Party and “Genocide Joe” Biden. Weingarten has viciously denounced the anti-genocide protests by students and educators as “horrific, unacceptable examples of antisemitism.” She has visited both Ukraine and Israel to endorse Biden’s wars of aggression.

The LEO and AFT are determined to block a unified struggle among students, faculty and staff on each UM campus. Kirsten Herold, president of the LEO on the Ann Arbor campus and the secretary-treasurer of the AFT in Michigan, recently told *Michigan Public*, in a cynical and dishonest attempt to attribute the union bureaucracy’s opposition to a strike to the rank-and-file:

A lot of our members were reluctant to strike precisely because there’s so much else going on that adding our piece would be throwing fuel on the fire.

At the same time, the unions are preventing a joint struggle with Ann Arbor teachers and support staff in the same city, who are opposing the efforts of the local school board to impose \$25 million in budget cuts and layoffs. Both the LEO and the Ann Arbor Education Association (AAEA) have remained silent on the simultaneous struggles taking place in Ann Arbor.

To carry forward their struggle and prevent yet another sellout by the union bureaucrats, lecturers must immediately form a rank-and-file strike committee and prepare to take independent action. A strike by academic workers—in unity with students and K-12 teachers and fighting to link up with workers across Michigan, the US and internationally—would galvanize students and signify the entry of the working class into the fight against imperialist war.

On May 3, the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at the University of Michigan issued a statement calling on LEO members to vote “No” on the sellout contract and organize a strike to halt the repression of peaceful student protests across the US. The statement noted:

Rank-and-file lecturers must stop this betrayal and come to the aid of the students! This is your fight!

The attack on the student protests is an attack on the working class. It is workers and their children who will pay for the escalating war against Russia over Ukraine, the planned war against Iran and the war preparations against China, all fronts in an emerging Third World War. Workers and working class youth are to serve as cannon fodder, while their wages, social benefits, schools and jobs are to be gutted to pay for record military budgets.

The specter of the unity of workers and students, fusing the class struggle at home with the fight against war, frightens the ruling elites everywhere.

Their fear is well founded. The working class, not only on the campuses but throughout society, is horrified by the ongoing mass killing in Gaza and the vicious slander and physical attacks on campus protesters, denounced as “antisemitic” because of their anger at the murderous Netanyahu government in Israel.

A strike by a key group of workers at UM publicly defending the students would begin to give expression to this opposition and help bring to bear the immense power of the working class internationally, uniting the fight to defend jobs and wages with the fight against war.

In addition to Ann Arbor public schools and school districts across Michigan, job cuts are also hitting Ford Rouge, located barely five miles from UM’s Dearborn campus, and at Stellantis plants in Detroit, Toledo and more. Warren Stamping (Stellantis) workers in suburban Detroit voted by 72 percent Monday to authorize a strike over health and safety grievances.

Ryan, a lecturer at the Ann Arbor campus, explained to the WSWS that there were years of below-inflation raises and unaddressed issues of workload, which amounted to impossible living conditions. He stated:

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.

A member of the Graduate Employees’ Organization (GEO), a separate AFT-affiliated union on campus which betrayed a protracted struggle by graduate students last year, told the WSWS:

Generally, there’s a sense that it’s not a great contract and the leadership is just going ahead with it. I would just say, lecturers, if they feel ready, they should go on strike, and the GEO and graduate school members would support it. We come out and support them when they demonstrate, and people from GEO would try to support a strike by lecturers.

Asked whether lecturers should strike and support the protests, the GEO member said:

If they were to strike and somehow organize with the pro-Palestinian movement, that would be great. I don’t

know to what extent officially the GEO would support that, but the conscious members likely would.

After more than six months of negotiations conducted by the union over wages, job security and workload reduction, none of the demands of the lecturers were won. The LEO bargaining platform had promised its members “a big increase in year one to offset recent inflation,” but negotiators initialed a TA which leaves academic workers in poverty.

LEO President Kirsten Herold rather candidly admitted to the betrayal, stating, “We made the very difficult decision to accept lower raises for the Flint and Dearborn campuses.” She added lamely, “We will continue to advocate for more support for our two regional campuses.”

Dismissing the overwhelming strike vote, Herold promptly settled within 48 hours of the final deal being offered by the university administration. The wage hikes of 8 percent, 6 percent, 6 percent and 5 percent in Ann Arbor, coupled with 3 percent in each of the contract’s four years in Dearborn and Flint, are an insult to hard-working educators. The last-minute contract sweetener of lump sum payments of 3 percent in the first year and 2 percent in the second year for the satellite campuses does next to nothing to provide a living wage, much less make up for years of scraping by.

The procedure by which the LEO/AFT is seeking to ram through this sellout is totally undemocratic. Rank-and-file lecturers have only been provided the co-called contract “highlights.” The leadership has announced that workers will be given access to the full contract only *after* the deal is ratified!

It has become increasingly clear that war abroad means repression and austerity at home. The federal budget has been restructured to finance a gargantuan expansion of the military at the expense of social spending, including public education.

The attacks on students are an attack on the working class and all democratic rights. The genocide in Gaza is only one part of a global counter-revolution, ripping up core democratic rights and normalizing mass murder as a legitimate policy tool.

We urge University of Michigan lecturers to join with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) and take a stand both in defense of the protesters and the right of all workers to a decent standard of living. Fill out the form below to join the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee.



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