

# University of Rochester graduate workers on indefinite strike

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Graduate workers at the University of Rochester launched an indefinite strike on April 21 following the refusal of the university's administration to permit a private election agreement, independent of the Trump-controlled National Labor Relations Board (NLRB).

Also in April, the Trump regime revoked 11 international student visas on campus, sparking mass opposition which has created stronger support for organization by graduate workers.

Graduate students at the University of Rochester (UR) are exploited by a system that pays them in stipends and earn as little as \$15,000 a year, in a city that regularly ranks as one of the poorest in the country.

In comparison, with an endowment of \$3.6 billion, UR is listed regularly among the top 100 richest universities in the US.

With a student population of 6,764 undergraduates and 5,396 postgraduates and a yearly tuition well above \$60,000 a year, the university and its associated medical center are also the largest employers in the entire Rochester region.

The graduate workers are seeking to affiliate with the Graduate Labor Union (GLU), part of SEIU (Service Employees International Union) Local 200United. They are demanding better conditions and pay and would potentially be represented by SEIU Local 200United.

The Trump administration has effectively disabled the operations of the NLRB, which had previously been tasked with monitoring and certifying union elections by secret ballot.

In January, Trump fired NLRB member and former Chair Gwynne Wilcox and NLRB General Counsel Jennifer Abruzzo, leaving the agency with just two members, one below the required minimum to function.

The university administration, well aware of this

development, has used Trump's policies to its advantage by backing out of a previous agreement to recognize the union it had reached in December of last year. It is refusing to move forward with a private vote apart from the NLRB.

A UR statement reads:

Typically, seeking to unionize is done by filing a petition with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), a federal agency that would conduct a secret ballot election to determine if a majority of graduate students wish to be represented by a union. ... This is the same process that each of the several groups of unionized employees on our campus used to be recognized. While the University would prefer that the students decide against participating in the strike, there will be no reprisals or retaliation against those who lawfully participate in the strike.

Earlier in April, the university administration repeatedly did agree to meet with the New York state's Public Employment Relations Board (PERB) and the SEIU local president. However, at the meeting between the university and PERB in nearby Syracuse, New York, graduate workers were refused entry, unless they agreed to sign a confidentiality agreement regarding the meeting's contents.

UR is closing ranks with Trump against grad students even as it has joined a lawsuit with 12 other universities over the White House's cuts to NIH (National Institutes of Health) funding. The cuts have cost the UR \$40 million annually in research funding.

Graduate workers spoke at a May Day rally in downtown Rochester, where thousands gathered to demonstrate against the Trump regime. Keelin Quirk, a fourth-year mechanical engineering Ph.D. student, told WXXI radio:

Anytime you hear about the exciting discoveries being made at the University of Rochester, some medical breakthrough, it was graduate students doing most of the work behind that. We're the people doing the lab work, the reading, the writing, the data analysis.

This week, the administration once again refused to meet with the members of the Graduate Labor Union Organizing Committee, once again citing the legal Catch-22 the Trump administration has placed workers in. UR spokesperson Sara Miller wrote in a statement:

There is no legally recognized union that represents our graduate students. Because the Graduate Labor Union Organizing Committee is not a recognized student group ... it would be inappropriate, and potentially unlawful under the (National Labor Relations Act), for University leaders to meet with any purported representative of this group under the circumstances.

Graduate students have every right to have their democratic decision to join a union be recognized. But to safeguard their struggle against the administration, they must also ensure real rank-and-file control. The exclusion of graduate students from the Syracuse meeting between the administration and SEIU officials shows there is every possibility that the SEIU bureaucrats will reach a corrupt deal behind their backs, trading concessions to the university on wages and other key demands in exchange for union recognition.

Graduate students should form a rank-and-file strike committee to give themselves real control, including the ability to countermand any decision made by the

SEIU which violates their democratic will and to appeal for the widest possible solidarity and support from UR students and workers across the world.

Nationwide, graduate students have been thrust into struggle not only against university administrations but pro-corporate union officials. Graduate students at the University of California forced the United Auto Workers to call a system-wide strike last year in defense of their own members protesting against the Gaza genocide only through a near-rebellion.

Meanwhile, the UAW and its "reform" President Shawn Fain have openly supported Trump's trade war policies and have refused to defend former UAW member and graduate student Mahmoud Khalil after he was disappeared by ICE to a prison in Louisiana.

Students must turn out to the working class as the basic progressive and revolutionary force in society. As the WSWS wrote recently:

There is no way to defeat the menace of dictatorship without getting to the core of the problem, the capitalist system, with its vast social inequality and oligarchic rule. The fight to defend democratic rights is a struggle that vastly transcends the boundaries of Harvard Yard and other universities and colleges.

The defense of Harvard and other universities against the fascists requires the building of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), a revolutionary movement among young people based on a socialist program and perspective, to spearhead this movement and provide it conscious direction.



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