

Michigan Democrats move to suppress University of Michigan graduate workers' struggle

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On February 12, Michigan's Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer intervened to suppress the contract struggle of academic workers at the University of Michigan (U-M). Micki Czerniak, a state mediator appointed by the Michigan Employment Relations Commission (MERC), ordered a mandatory 28-day pause in negotiations between the university administration and the Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO).

This "cooling-off" period functions as a de facto state injunction. It is a political maneuver designed to break the workers' momentum, criminalize their use of their basic democratic rights and shield the university administration from the demands of the rank and file.

The mediator's directive stipulates that the suspension must be used to establish stringent security protocols for future sessions, explicitly aiming to limit the number of rank-and-file participants, implement identification procedures and potentially relocate the talks entirely off campus to Detroit.

The pretext used by the U-M administration and the MERC mediator for this intervention was a peaceful protest on February 6. Approximately 100 GEO members mobilized outside a private caucus room to demand transparent, face-to-face bargaining, ending the administration's reliance on closed-door "shuttle bargaining." When workers approached the room to deliver handwritten letters, Human Resource representatives slammed the door shut and refused to engage. The administration fled the premises and manufactured a narrative of "safety concerns" and "escalating emotions" to justify suspending the talks.

The timing is decisive. The state and university have chosen a window in the academic calendar when the GEO's most potent leverage—the withholding of teaching, grading and end-of-term work—can be neutralized. Pushing bargaining into the final weeks before term's end reduces picket pressure as students disperse and allows the administration to dock pay and to prepare scab staffing or automated replacements over the summer. It forces exhausted, cash-strapped graduate workers to choose between immediate survival and sustained resistance. This is a repetition of the exact "Summer Break" trap that led

to the 2023 betrayal.

Poverty wages, soaring rents within the military-industrial complex

The immediate driver of the contract dispute is a brutal economic grinder that is systematically reducing academic workers to destitution. Non-PhD graduate student workers at U-M are currently paid poverty wages, with annual stipends stagnating around \$29,000.

Against this fixed income, the cost of living in Ann Arbor has become entirely unlivable. Studio apartments in Ann Arbor now average \$2,043 per month, a staggering 17 percent annual increase.

The persistent claim by the Board of Regents that there is "no money" to meet the union's demands for a living wage is a transparent, empirically verifiable lie. The refusal to pay is a deliberate class policy designed to protect the university's multibillion-dollar endowment.

While starving its educators, the university is awash in massive infusions of defense funding, functioning as an intellectual node in the logistical and strategic preparations for global imperialist war.

In January 2024, the U.S. Army extended its relationship with the U-M Automotive Research Center (ARC), signing a five-year agreement to provide up to \$100 million in funding. The ARC focuses on developing autonomous off-road vehicles and virtual prototypes for military application.

The university announced in September 2025 the Center for Prediction, Reasoning and Intelligence for Multiphysics Exploration (C-PRIME), backed by a \$19.4 million grant from the Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration. Directed by Aerospace Engineering Professor Venkat Raman, C-PRIME utilizes exascale supercomputing to develop an "AI oracle" specifically geared toward next-generation hypersonic weapons.

The university administration is directly complicit in the preparation for military confrontation with China by collaborating in the witch-hunt persecution of five Chinese-born plant biologists. The IYSSE at U-M has raised a principled defense of these researchers.

The lessons of 2023

The current impasse and state repression characterizing the 2026 negotiations are the direct continuation of the historic betrayals orchestrated by the union apparatus during the 2023 U-M GEO strike.

The 2023 strike was systematically isolated, financially starved and ultimately liquidated by the leadership of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the parent union of the GEO. AFT President Randi Weingarten, who draws an extortionate annual salary of over \$426,000, was a staunch defender of the Biden-Harris administration's war policies and a prominent Zionist.

During the 2023 strike, the AFT bureaucracy completely withheld its massive national strike fund—with net assets of \$55 million—refusing to provide any meaningful strike pay. The AFT leadership kept the struggle sealed off from simultaneous academic strikes at Rutgers University and in Chicago.

The executive leadership of the GEO, politically dominated by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), serves as the “left” face of this bureaucracy. While deploying performative, radical rhetoric, they consistently channel genuine working class dissent back into the legalistic framework of the capitalist state. Confronted by the MERC injunction, the DSA-led leadership is prioritizing procedural maneuvering over mobilizing the broader working class to defy the state's dictates.

The broadening attack: the crisis in Ann Arbor Public Schools

The assault on graduate workers is part of a comprehensive offensive against the entire working class. Within the local public school district, Ann Arbor Public Schools (AAPS), nearly 2,000 teachers, paraprofessionals and support staff are currently working under a contract that expired on December 31.

In 2024, to maintain a \$45 million “fund balance” and satisfy credit rating agencies, the school board aggressively slashed \$20.4 million from the budget. This austerity resulted in the elimination of 141 critical positions, including 94 teachers,

devastating essential programs like elementary world languages, STEAM and music.

The struggle of AAPS educators is being actively suppressed by the Ann Arbor Education Association (AAEA) and the Michigan Education Association (MEA). AAEA President Fred Klein allowed the contract to lapse without organizing any fight, explicitly endorsing the district's strategy of reducing staff through attrition.

The union bureaucracy's limited job actions, such as suspending voluntary extracurricular supervision, are cynical pressure tactics designed to let off steam while avoiding a genuine confrontation with the Democratic Party establishment that oversees this austerity.

Build rank-and-file committees of educators

Educators must draw the necessary political conclusions. The fight for living wages in Michigan is inextricably linked to the global fight against World War III and capitalist barbarism.

GEO members must immediately convene rank-and-file meetings. They should elect an accountable strike committee, publish a non-negotiable demands list (a living stipend indexed to local cost-of-living, immediate backpay, no reprisals, public livestreamed bargaining with elected worker delegates, and a categorical pledge by the university not to cooperate with ICE), and begin a city-wide and cross-sector solidarity outreach to faculty, service workers, AAPS educators and municipal unions in Detroit.

They should demand the release of national union strike resources and prepare for continuous picketing that prevents the administration from simply waiting out the term. Publicize every instance of university collusion with military and intelligence funding so the campus fight becomes a political issue the administration cannot hide.



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