

UIC graduate workers launch third strike in seven years against poverty wages

Alexander Fangmann

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Graduate student workers at the University of Illinois Chicago walked off the job this week, launching their third strike in seven years against poverty wages, unaffordable healthcare and the exploitation of a workforce that has been stripped of any pretense of financial security. It is part of a national eruption of struggle among academic workers—which the union bureaucracy is working hard to isolate and suppress.

The strikers are members of the Graduate Educators Organization (GEO), an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). The more than 1,500 graduate workers who have walked out teach courses, run laboratories, and generate the research revenue that makes UIC function.

Under the contract the GEO accepted in 2022, the minimum annual income for a UIC graduate worker stood at \$24,200. The average rent for a one-bedroom apartment in Chicago now exceeds \$2,300 a month. Energy costs have risen 8.1 percent since that contract was signed. Healthcare contributions have increased each year, with the university covering only 25 percent of dependent care costs—meaning a graduate worker with children is largely on their own.

Meanwhile, UIC reported \$490.7 million in research funding in the last fiscal year, a 27 percent increase since 2019. Enrollment has reached record levels. The top ten administrators at UIC are collectively paid more than \$6 million annually. The university's Board of Trustees is populated by millionaires and billionaires, appointed overwhelmingly by Democratic Governor J.B. Pritzker, himself a billionaire.

The GEO bargaining team has entered this strike having already reduced its central wage demand from \$55,000 to \$38,000 for a nine-month contract—still above what the university has offered, but a significant pre-emptive concession before negotiations have

concluded.

This is the opening of a familiar sequence. UIC graduate students struck in 2019 and again in 2022, and on both occasions the AFT-affiliated apparatus produced contracts that left them in conditions of economic desperation while announcing victories.

When graduate workers walked out in April 2022, the AFT and the Illinois Federation of Teachers prevented UIC faculty from carrying out sympathy strikes, and the SEIU kept campus workers and healthcare staff on the job. No serious effort was made to shut the campus down. Graduate workers, denied meaningful strike pay by an organization whose president Randi Weingarten earns close to half a million dollars annually, were reduced to crowdfunding on GoFundMe.

When the GEO suspended the strike and announced a settlement, it accepted wages of only \$22,590 in the first year, rising to \$24,200 by the third. The contract also contained a no-strike clause binding workers to those terms for the duration of the agreement.

Today, UIC workers are part of a wave of opposition among academic workers across the United States, who have entered struggle in 2026 with a determination and militancy that reflects the depth of the crisis they face.

But standing in the way of this movement, at every turn, is the trade union bureaucracy.

At Columbia University, student workers voted by 91.5 percent to authorize a strike. But the United Auto Workers refused to authorize one and threatened to place the local under trusteeship if it did not drop its political demands. At the University of California, 40,000 academic workers were kept on an expired contract after a 93.3 percent strike authorization vote, their mandate simply overridden by the apparatus. At New York University, contract faculty launched a strike that was shut down within a single day after the UAW

announced a tentative agreement the workers had not seen.

At Harvard, 4,000 graduate workers have broken through, launching a strike that is advancing not only wage demands but explicitly political ones: opposition to ICE repression and a fight against the university's integration into the military-intelligence apparatus. There too, the fight is as much against the UAW apparatus as against the administration itself. The UAW-aligned Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers has already been pushed through a one-year contract amounting to a real-wage cut—a deliberate move to isolate the graduate workers.

The suppression of strike action is the coordinated policy of a union apparatus whose leading figures—including DSA member and UAW Region 9A Director Brandon Mancilla, who personally vetoed the Columbia strike and threatened its local leadership—are organically connected to the Democratic Party. The AFT, whose president Randi Weingarten was until recently a member of the Democratic National Committee, performs the same function.

Graduate workers are not only students but a part of the working class. They must appeal beyond the campus for support across the city and the country. In particular, GEO's demand for protections for international student—a demand of particular urgency given the Trump administration's fascistic immigration policy—cannot be won except through a struggle by the working class in defense of democratic rights, independent of both parties. The Democrats refuse to lift a finger because they are more afraid of a mass movement from below than they are of Trump.

Finals week is approaching. Grades are due May 13. Graduate workers are at maximum strategic leverage right now. Their labor is essential to the functioning of the university at the moment the university most needs it to function.

The question is whether that leverage is exercised by workers themselves, on their own terms—or dissipated by an apparatus that will use the same deadline to justify a settlement that locks in another cycle of poverty wages and no-strike obligations.

The answer to that question must come from the workers themselves. UIC graduate workers need to take organizational control of their own struggle—to form a rank-and-file committee, democratically elected and

accountable to the membership, that can make decisions about the strike independently of AFT directives.

Such a committee would be in a position to reach out directly to UIC faculty and undergraduate students over the heads of their respective organizations; to appeal to Chicago teachers, transit workers and healthcare workers for active solidarity; and to connect the UIC struggle to the strikes at Harvard, Columbia and across the country that are fighting the same battles against the same apparatus.

Workers need a different organizational form—one they control, that answers to them, and that is capable of waging the political struggle this moment requires.



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