

# UIC graduate workers union suspends strike without reaching an agreement

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The Graduate Employees Organization (GEO) at the University of Illinois Chicago (UIC) suspended its strike on May 15 without either reaching an agreement or moving the university on any of its key demands.

Roughly 1,500 graduate workers had struck on April 27 after working for over a year without a contract, having voted by a large margin to strike after the university administration refused to budge on the issue of pay.

After insisting for months that it would not offer more than a 2 percent raise, on May 12 the university offered to increase this to 2.25 percent. This would raise minimum pay to \$24,745 for a nine-month appointment, instead of the initial offer of \$24,684, a \$61 increase.

The GEO surrender is an act of betrayal. The GEO claims the suspension of the strike is “not a surrender or admission of defeat,” But they do not outline how they expect to achieve any of workers’ demands on pay, healthcare or protections for international graduate workers, now that it has given up its leverage over final grades.

The American Federation of Teachers, GEO’s parent organization, also helped to starve strikers into submission through the union’s lack of a sufficient strike fund.

According to the union’s press release, the university administration threatened to lock out graduate workers for the summer term, and possibly even into the fall. The GEO statement claimed “this threat to the livelihood of our most vulnerable workers was not a risk we were willing to take.”

In other words, the union leadership, faced with graduate workers who overwhelmingly wanted to fight against the provocative offers from management, were forced to take them out on a limited strike,

understanding that without a sufficient strike fund, graduate workers, most of whom are barely able to make ends meet as it is, would not be able to extend the strike into the summer.

In the memorandum of understanding with the UIC administration, GEO agreed that graduate workers would submit final grades for the spring semester by May 21. The withheld grades had become a point of conflict between the university administration and the university’s full-time faculty, who are themselves in the midst of contract negotiations.

UIC administration tried to force faculty to submit grades in place of graduate workers in cases where they were the “faculty of record” for the course, even though such a change would have been a substantial increase in their workload. This raised the possibility and necessity for solidarity and unity between graduate workers and professors.

Additionally, the union agreed that it would not resume the strike without giving the university a 10-day notice, even though such notice would not be required by Illinois law. By agreeing to give notice, the union leadership is severely undermining the impact of a resumed strike. In fact, the GEO leaders have no intention of going back on strike. Their main task is to work out a basis for getting graduate workers to sign off on a deal more or less in line with the administration’s last offer, especially on the central issue of pay.

The issue of pay looms large because average rent in Chicago stands at \$1,956 per month, forcing most graduate students to live with roommates to avoid spending the entirety of their pay simply on housing. Supporting a family is all but impossible. With inflation for food, energy and rent in Chicago far outpacing the last offer of 2.25 percent, the university’s offer

represents a real decline in living standards.

According to the GEO, the university administration is also refusing to consider retroactive pay raises, so graduate workers have already experienced a real decline in wages by working without a contract for the past year and are guaranteed to further lose ground if they continue to follow the union playbook.

A real strategy for graduate workers must be based on class struggle, not accommodation. UIC administrators serve at the pleasure of the university's board of trustees, representatives of the ruling class, nearly all of whom are bankers, financiers or corporate executives who have the full backing of the Democratic Party, including billionaire Democratic Governor J.B. Pritzker, who appointed them as trustees.

The ruling class is united in their determination that working class living standards must be shredded in order to funnel hundreds of billions of dollars into the military and speculative ventures on Wall Street. The union bureaucracy functions as the capitalist oligarchy's industrial enforcers, exemplified by Joe Biden's reference to them in 2024 as his "domestic NATO."

UIC graduate workers need to take control of the struggle through the formation of a rank-and-file committee. Such a committee must be democratically elected and accountable to the membership, and must be able to make decisions about negotiations and resumption of the strike independently of the AFT, which in every recent struggle has worked to suppress and betray strikes by educators.

The fight of graduate workers at UIC must expand, and link up with the struggles not just of full-time faculty, who face many of the same issues, but also Chicago public school teachers, who are facing layoffs as the school year ends as well as educators and other sections of workers across the country and internationally.



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