

# University of Michigan graduate student workers' union extends contract

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The contract covering 3,300 graduate student workers at the University of Michigan expired May 1. The Graduate Employees Organization (GEO), Local 3350 of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), extended the old contract and announced no plans to strike for a new agreement.

The GEO represents over 3,300 workers, including graduate student instructors, graduate student staff assistants and graduate student research assistants across U-M's three campuses in Ann Arbor, Dearborn and Flint. In addition to the GEO, the AFT has five other locals across the three U-M campuses and the university-owned Michigan Medicine healthcare complex in Ann Arbor.

Collectively, these locals represent 1,700 lecturers, 180 library workers and 1,900 staff members across the three campuses, as well as 4,700 healthcare professionals and 1,300 resident and fellow physicians at Michigan Medicine and over 160 tenure-track faculty members at U-M's Flint campus.

Formal contract negotiations began on November 14, 2025 and have yet to reach an agreement. Under the 2023-2026 contract, if "a successor Agreement is not negotiated by 11:59 p.m. May 1, 2026, this Agreement shall continue in full force and effect unless thirty (30) days' written notice of termination is given by the Union or the University."

According to updates from the GEO and U-M Human Resources, neither party has issued a notice of termination, meaning the GEO/AFT leadership has tacitly agreed to extend the expired contract indefinitely.

For its 2026-2029 contract, the GEO is officially demanding childcare subsidies, cost coverage and the creation of additional university-funded care facilities; expanded healthcare coverage, a reduction of out-of-

pocket payments and dental, vision and medicine coverage; a limit on annual workforce reductions to 3 percent, alongside additional job security measures to protect graduate workers against retaliation or intimidation for leaving programs funded by or associated with the U.S. Department of Defense.

The GEO's broader demands include "control over the workplace," which largely consists of banning the university from replacing graduate worker positions with AI technologies. Alongside this demand, the GEO is asking for greater transparency in university actions and communications with graduates regarding program changes and other academic operations.

Despite these areas of concern receiving lengthy descriptions and definitions in the GEO's publicly available "Contract Language Mass Document," the majority of the union's official demands remain vaguely defined at best, most strikingly regarding the issue of salary and the defense of democratic rights.

In the 2023 U-M GEO strike, workers demanded an immediate 60 percent wage increase to match the cost of living, which, especially for Ann Arbor campus workers, had risen dramatically following the COVID-19 pandemic and the outbreak of war in Ukraine. By isolating the strike, the GEO/AFT bureaucracy ultimately pushed through an inadequate 20 percent wage increase over the three years of the contract. The bureaucracy obscured its betrayal by incorporating the so-called "Rackham Plan," which extended fellowship money for covered graduate students to the summer months.

In reality, the "Rackham Plan" provided funding only to a small fraction of the GEO membership, leaving the majority with unlivable wages. Now the GEO bureaucracy, without presenting any concrete demand for wage increases, advances the expansion of the

“Rackham Plan” as its sole salary demand, claiming that expanding the plan will provide full funding for PhD students for seven years. It is clear this strategy aims to mask another sellout on wages.

Over the past four years, the U-M administration has spearheaded the crackdown on students and workers protesting the US-Israeli genocide against Palestinians in Gaza, utilizing police violence, legal prosecution and administrative repression. Despite mass opposition to these measures among rank-and-file grad student workers and students, the GEO’s official demands are limited to a corporatist proposal calling for a union stake in the university’s \$17.9 billion endowment.

Through this demand, the GEO falsely claims that graduate workers and students will have a path toward divestment from Israeli- and US military-aligned companies and organizations, and the rolling back of repressive measures implemented by the university against students and workers over the last four years.

On the issue of police repression and attacks on the immigrant and international student body and workforce at the university, the union bureaucracy demands that U-M sever its cooperation with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

On March 19, 2026, Danhao Wang—a brilliant 30-year-old Chinese postdoctoral researcher in semiconductor physics at the university, whose landmark work had been published in *Nature*—took his own life by jumping from an upper floor of the G.G. Brown Laboratory. This occurred one day after Wang was subjected to hostile interrogation by federal agents.

Over previous months, the Trump Department of Justice had jailed five U-M Chinese researchers on trumped-up charges of smuggling and lying about “toxic” substances—in reality, relatively harmless research materials—and linked to alleged “agroterrorism.” The scientists were forced to make plea deals and then deported back to China. The university administration has fully collaborated in this anti-democratic dragnet.

Throughout this entire ordeal, the GEO has issued no public statement opposing the witch-hunt of the Chinese researchers or even acknowledging Wang’s death.

In response to the exposure of university surveillance of anti-genocide student and employee protesters, the GEO leadership is calling for union oversight of

surveillance and data collection, implying that such invasions of privacy are acceptable if the union bureaucracy signs off on them.

The university administration is proposing a meager 1.5 percent annual salary increase, well below the inflation rate. The university has also indicated it intends to cut healthcare benefits and refuses to offer job security protections.

It maintains that relations with ICE and other democratic issues are outside the scope of labor negotiations.

The betrayal of Harvard’s graduate workers by the United Auto Workers stands as a stark warning to U-M graduate employees. At Harvard, 4,000 graduate student workers, unionized under the Harvard Graduate Student Union, a UAW affiliate, walked out on April 21, only to be ordered back to work after 40 days without a contract.

GEO workers could mobilize broad support in the working class if they strike for a decent contract and demand an end to attacks on democratic rights. Some 2,000 Ann Arbor Public Schools teachers, paraprofessionals and support staff have been working without a contract for nearly six months. Auto parts workers at the Nexteer steering plant in Saginaw and Dana plants in Michigan and Ohio have rejected sellout contracts brought down by the UAW bureaucracy.

The main obstacle is the trade union bureaucracy, whether that of the AFT, the UAW or the National Education Association, which functions to suppress the class struggle on behalf of the employers and the government. U-M graduate workers should form a rank-and-file committee independent of and opposed to the GEO and AFT bureaucracy to prepare strike action and link up with Ann Arbor educators, workers at other universities, autoworkers and other sections of the working class.



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