

# Reject the sellout on tuition waivers—for free higher education for all

## Striking Illinois grad students speak out against attacks on higher education

By Andy Thompson and Jessica Goldstein  
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According to a *Chicago Tribune* report, the Graduate Employees Organization (GEO) has reached an agreement with the university administration and is working quickly to end the strike of 2,700 graduate student workers at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), with members voting on the agreement Thursday and Friday. If reports are accurate, the GEO has given in to the university's main demand: to be able to reduce or eliminate tuition waivers for future students in exchange for paltry raises that will be entirely eaten up by inflation by the end of the contract.

This rotten sellout, of a piece with other contracts and agreements worked out by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), with which the GEO is affiliated, is a betrayal of the principled fight by graduate student workers for full access to public higher education. The contract, which is reportedly for five years, includes a meager pay raise of 4.5 percent in the first year and 2 percent in each of the second and third years.

The university will also pay 87 percent of insurance fees instead of 80 percent, and will now cover 25 percent of health insurance for up to one dependent. In other words, this agreement ensures that graduate student workers will still make poverty wages, and will still be liable to pay enormous health care costs out of their own pocket, particularly if they have families.

On Wednesday, March 7, a *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team interviewed striking graduate student workers at UIUC, and found many students who expressed frustration with their treatment by the university administration, and the expectation that they should live in poverty while doing work essential to the functioning of the university.

Graduate students at UIUC went on strike to fight for higher wages, better healthcare and the guarantee of tuition waivers, not just for themselves, but for future students, preserving access to public higher education. Tuition

waivers help cover the high cost of schooling and are a lifeline for students, many of whom face enormous amounts of debt upon completing their degrees. Many graduate students also continue to pay student loans for their undergraduate degrees, adding more weight to their financial burden.

About 200 striking graduate students gathered for a rally at noon in the East Quad of campus. Protesters came to the rally with drums, signs and horns to call attention to their struggle. Several members of the GEO spoke at the rally. Chicago Alderman Carlos Ramirez-Rosa, a UIUC alumnus and member of the pseudo-left Democratic Socialists of America, which serves as a “left” cover of the Democrat Party, also made an appearance.

WSWS reporters spoke to students at the rally about their experiences. Chris, who teaches psychology and Latin, described the day-to-day struggles of graduate students: “I make enough to pay my bills but I still have student loans, and my paychecks are very small. We can't be expected to make as much as we do and maintain a decent standard of living, where we don't have to just eat ramen and still be expected to teach and grade all the assignments.

“The University is run like a business. In fact, most of the administration has come from business.”

Another student at the rally, who teaches German, said: “We want equal access to higher education. That means fighting for tuition waivers. We are living paycheck to paycheck, if you have to go to the doctor for something, it's a big deal. We just want to be paid fairly for the work that we do.”

WSWS reporters spoke to students during the march around campus after the rally. The march gained attention and support from students and faculty who stopped to show support on the sidewalks and waved from windows.

A student from Italy spoke to reporters about his concern that access to higher education is becoming a privilege only for the rich. “People should not be able to go to school only

because they have money,” he said. “I am an international student, so if I did not get funding for my education I would not even be able to get a visa.” The WSWS asked if he saw similarities in the situation of international graduate students and American graduate students. He replied, “Basically, we are fighting for the same thing.”

Reporters spoke with students at pickets held around the campus. Some striking graduate student workers did not know that the GEO had invited Randi Weingarten, president of the AFT, to speak to students on Thursday. Many reacted in disgust after learning that Weingarten, who makes almost \$500,000 per year, was head of the organization that shut down the West Virginia teachers’ strike and had held secret meetings with Trump’s fascistic then-adviser Stephen Bannon.

On the picket lines, reporters spoke with Christine, who described what she had to do to survive on her salary: “There are points that got so bad that I considered pawning gifts from my family because I only had five dollars to feed myself for two weeks. It takes some people ten years to finish a dissertation because they have to take time off to work. I’m struggling to eat and I can’t imagine them taking more from me.”

A WSWS reporter asked Christine to comment on the fact that while hundreds of billions were being spent on war, cuts were being extracted from students and teachers. She replied: “I think grad students are putting those connections together. As for the GEO, I have not heard if they have anything to say about it.”

The University administration and the union are working together to keep the strikers isolated from undergraduate students and the wider working class by outlawing email and social media communication about the strike from graduate students. Instead, it appears that grad students are only able to use the GEO’s Twitter and Facebook feeds.

One graduate student, Liza, described the tactic used to silence the graduate students and make it difficult to bring undergraduate students into their struggle: “We are afraid that our supervisors in our departments could report us for something. Our jobs could be threatened—this has not happened yet, but it could.”

Graduate student workers must assess the role of the GEO if they are to take their struggle forward and prevent the AFT from betraying their strike as it did with the striking teachers in West Virginia. The leadership of the GEO circulated a document at the strike titled “5 Things you can do to support the GEO strike.” Among their demands were for professors to move classes out of picketed buildings and to call Provost Andreas Cangellaris. These demands pose no threat to the functioning of the university and the financial interests of university officials. Furthermore, asking students

to tie their interests to those of a high-paid university official backed by the major corporations is meant to divert and demoralize the struggle of the graduate students.

A PhD student from Korea told WSWS reporters that he was on strike to fight against the exploitation of graduate students. “We want this University to treat graduate students as future educators, not like a cheap labor force.

“Both teachers and graduate students are fighting to achieve the same goal. We both want to provide an education to the public, not just a small group of people.” He added that the West Virginia strikes had gained wide support: “Another thing when it comes to West Virginia, teachers are striking and their students are supporting their teachers. They are even working together, and that’s a good thing.”

Graduate student workers at UIUC should reject the sellout agreement being promoted by the GEO and the AFT and fight to take the leadership of their strike into their own hands. They must defy the orders of the university and the union to keep their struggle isolated from undergraduate students and other workers. Together, they must put forth the demand for adequate wages, full healthcare coverage and free education for all, to be paid for by expropriation of the wealth of the corporations and banks and the trillions of dollars spent by the US on imperialist war.

UIUC graduate student workers should reject the GEO, a bankrupt organization, inextricably tied to the Democratic Party. In forming their own rank-and-file committees, they should reach out for the support of students and teachers around the world, including lecturers who are on strike in Britain and Kenya and teachers in West Virginia, Arizona, Oklahoma and Canada who are coming into direct conflict with the state and corporate rule.

To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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