

Strike looms for University of Illinois at Chicago graduate students

By George Gallanis
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On March 19, over 1,500 graduate student workers at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), represented by the Graduate Employees Organization (GEO) Local 6297, are set to strike unless an agreement is reached with the university.

Graduate students held an informational picket Thursday, March 14. The students have been working without a contract for five months and negotiations have been drawn out for more than a year, since March 1, 2018. The GEO and the university's bargaining team agreed to federal mediation in December, which began on February 1, 2019. As of this writing, the GEO has held 20 bargaining negotiations with UIC. Two more bargaining meetings are planned for today and the following Monday.

The university's current contract proposal is for a pathetic \$1,200 raise over the course of four years and would extend the length of the contract by one year.

Of 1,014 participating GEO members, 99.5 percent voted to authorize the strike on February 13, 2019. The overwhelming strike authorization expresses the growing militancy among educators across the United States and internationally. Approximately 71,000 educators have participated in a strike or walkout across the US in just the first eight weeks of this year, some UIC's 1,500 graduate workers are essential to the university's operations, teaching undergraduate students and grading papers. Graduate student workers are exploited by universities and forced to live in near impoverished conditions. Nationally, stipends for funded graduate students can vary from approximately \$13,000 to \$34,000, at best, per school year and some require that students take no other form of paid work in addition.

The current minimum wage agreed to by the GEO in the previous contract for UIC is \$18,065, which is for

half of a full-time position, which requires 20 hours per week of work for the nine-month school year.

International students make up almost 50 percent of graduate student workers and are burdened with extras fees. A recent survey of international graduate student workers conducted by the GEO indicates the impoverished conditions confronting them, which affect graduate workers as a whole. According to GEO Local 6297's Facebook page:

- Over 78 percent reported living on less than \$1,800 per month (after taxes), while 15 percent reported making less than \$1,600 per month.
- 62.7 percent reported having to pay \$2,000 or more in fees during the last academic year.
- Only 32.2 percent reported receiving income for 12 months.
- 77 percent said their financial situation affects their mental health.
- 81.5 percent reported their financial situation affects their academic progress.
- 89.1 percent reported feeling unsatisfied with their income.

For its part, the GEO proposed a 10 percent increase on the current minimum wage each year for the next three years, i.e., the duration of the contract, resulting in \$24,000 by 2021, well below the \$28,158 that is considered a living wage in Chicago. They are also seeking reductions in fees. Graduate student workers have to pay on average \$2,000 in fees per academic year. The GEO is calling for new appointment/reappointment policies that require departments to have policies for who gets appointed and why. But they are not demanding that students are guaranteed their appointments once received.

Such demands are demagogic at best. While UIC has millions of dollars available to provide substantial

raises for graduate student workers, GEO has no intention of waging any kind of real struggle. The GEO leadership has multiple times bluntly declared they are hurriedly seeking to avoid a strike and willing to make concessions.

Em Hall, Organizing Chair of the GEO Local 6297 steering committee, stated Wednesday at an event at UIC sponsored by the Young Democratic Socialists of America: “We have certain concessions we’re willing to make.” True to their word, the GEO has already conceded demands for wage increases to be required to increase with inflation and wage increases to be retroactive once new contract is signed.

Just Thursday, the GEO participated in a demonstration headlined, “Don’t force us to strike!” on UIC’s campus. The demonstration was co-sponsored by the UIC United Faculty Local 6456, which represents tenure/tenure-track and full-time non-tenure track faculty and is currently in mediation.

Both the GEO and UIC United Faculty Local 6456 are affiliated with the Illinois Federation of Teachers (IFT) and American Federation of Teachers (AFT). Neither union has planned any kind of joint strike action, part of a conscious effort to isolate teachers’ struggles.

In December 2017, the IFT endorsed billionaire investor J.B. Pritzker for governor, the current governor of Illinois. Pritzker’s sister, Penny Pritzker, served as Commerce Secretary for President Obama. Both Pritzkers have strong ties to the Democratic Party establishment, which has carried out ruthless assaults on public education in Illinois and across the United States.

The AFT for its part has overseen one criminal betrayal after another. To name a few, it suppressed strikes in West Virginia, where educators still have no solution to the underfunding of their healthcare system, and hastily ended the strike in Los Angeles, which did nothing to meet the teachers’ most important demands to increase wages, reduce class sizes, stop the expansion of charter schools, and address drastically underfunded budgets.

The GEO has also betrayed graduate students. Last year, the GEO sold out striking graduate workers at the University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana. The agreement abandoned the most pressing demand to fully fund the state’s public employees medical

insurance agency and end the expensive out-of-pocket costs. The workers “won,” as the GEO claimed, a 4.5 percent raise in the first year of the contract, followed by a paltry 2 percent increases in the second and third years.

The politics and history of these organizations, which the GEO is tied to, cannot be ignored or dismissed.

The GEO bears responsibility for the current impoverished conditions facing graduate students and is leading workers to another sellout agreement. This is because the GEO, like its parent organizations, is tied to the pro-capitalist Democratic Party, and will not, in a time when strikes by educators are breaking through at increasing rates, seek to wage any kind of struggle that might develop into a larger movement against capitalism and Democratic Party.

Fundamentally, graduate student workers confront not just economic but, ultimately, political ones.

In order to carry on a successful fight against the university administration, UIC graduate student workers must begin to organize their struggles outside of the confines of the GEO and build independent rank-and-file committees composed of democratically elected members completely outside the confines of the unions. Graduate student workers must call upon students and teachers, on-campus and across Chicago, to join their struggle. Appeals of support must be made to Chicago Public Schools teachers, logistics workers and autoworkers across the city and country.

The author also recommends:

Union betrays graduate workers’ strike at University of Illinois [14 March 2018]

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