

University of Illinois at Chicago grad student union pushes sellout contract

By Andy Thompson
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On Friday, April 5, the strike by 1,600 University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) graduate students was called off by the Graduate Employees Organization (GEO) Local 6297 after the union reached a tentative contract agreement with UIC administration. The union told grad students to return to work today even before voting on the deal. Grad students are reportedly voting Monday night.

The GEO, which is an affiliate of the Illinois Federation of Teachers (IFT) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), called the strike on March 19, six months after the previous contract expired.

The proposed three-year deal increases the campus minimum salary by \$2,550 over three years. Grad students will also receive an additional \$55 each semester to offset the cost of a \$50 increase in the general student fee next year. Grad students in the 2020-2021 school year will receive a one-time \$150 raise. The cost of the University provided healthcare dropped slightly from \$295 to \$240. The university will cover 20 percent of the cost of one dependent and 10 percent of the cost for additional dependents.

The agreement does nothing to address the central demands of grad students to totally waive the fees and increase pay to provide a reasonable standard of living in one of the costliest cities in America. The raise will be swallowed up by the fees that grad students have to pay in full at the beginning of each year. The \$18,140 salary is far below the original GEO demand for \$24,000 per year, which was below the estimated minimum cost of living in Chicago of \$28,000 per year.

The GEO reached the sellout agreement just as the strike was gaining support from different areas of the campus. UIC's undergraduate students had planned walkouts and demonstrations in support of the GEO

last Friday. In addition, UIC's faculty members are voting this week to authorize strike action.

While GEO bears responsibility for the defeat of the strike, the chief onus lies with the IFT and the AFT, which deliberately isolated the grad student struggle. The IFT and the AFT made sure the strike was shut down before faculty members and students could join the struggle and strengthen the grad students.

This follows the same pattern followed by the AFT, the National Education Association (NEA) and their state and local affiliates during the wave of teacher strikes over the last 15 months. Time and time again, the unions shut down one strike before another erupted, rushing to sign agreements that betrayed educators' demands for increased pay and school funding.

As soon as the UIC agreement was reached, the GEO declared a victory and even suggested that their repeated climbdowns were part of brilliant tactical maneuver.

Grad students, however, did not think they won any "victory." One grad student told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "It is not good that the faculty union and GEO did not work together to prepare simultaneous strikes. Workers should team up to create a stronger front against business and capitalist profit interests. I believe modern unions seek to divide and conquer groups of workers. Striking at different times is essentially a manifestation of this. That is, when workers are separated, they are less powerful. I feel that GEO is in lockstep with higher-up unions, which are in lockstep with politicians, who are in lockstep with profit-driven, at-the-expense-of-workers capitalism.

"I am paying \$800-\$1000 per semester in fees. There is really no fee relief in the proposed contract. Originally, the union spoke of a raise of something like 24 percent, hoping to raise the minimum wage to

around \$24,000. The administration consistently countered with much lower raises. GEO negotiators kept dropping lower. The new contract calls for a \$2,550 raise over three years. This basically sounds like a concession to the administration.

“Mainly, I believe the issues faced by graduate workers at UIC, and workers across capitalism, is the same: It is a systemic fight which plays out in a microcosm. Budget cuts and austerity abound. Simply fighting for a raise will not solve the long-term issue facing these workers.”

The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and other pseudo-left organizations did everything to prevent grad student from rebelling against the unions, which have imposed the Democrats’ austerity program.

The GEO leadership maintains close ties to *Jacobin* and the DSA, the supposed “left wing” of the Democratic Party which also hailed the sellouts in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Los Angeles and Oakland, California, as victories. Jeff Schuhrke, one of the GEO’s co-presidents, writes for *Jacobin* and has followed the playbook of his pseudo-left allies in isolating the UIC strike and subordinating the grad students to their maneuvers with state and local Democrats.

The strike by UIC graduate students thrust them into direct struggle against the Illinois Democratic Party, which oversees UIC. Illinois Democratic Governor J. B. Pritzker manages the University of Illinois Board of Trustees and has appointed several members of its management board, comprising largely corporate figures and investment bankers.

The Democratic Party, under former Mayor Rahm Emanuel, has found billions for corporate tax cuts and other subsidies for corporations, real estate developers and vanity projects like the Obama Presidential Center in the South Side, currently estimated to cost about \$500 million, \$175 million of which is expected to come from public sources. Meanwhile, working-class areas, public schools and higher education are starved of funds and resources.

During the strike, Schuhrke and the other GEO co-presidents wrote a letter to the billionaire governor Pritzker, calling him a “champion of workers’ rights.” In a Facebook post before the final bargaining session that led to the tentative agreement, GEO proudly admitted: “[I]n addition to the things we’ve already

conceded on, including full fee waivers, the ability to opt out of the CTA U-pass fee, more paid sick days, more paid personal days, more paid parental leave, stronger tuition waiver language, getting compensated for late appointment letters, having an article on academic freedom, and stepping down repeatedly on our wage proposal.” They continue, “We have made numerous concessions over the past 13 months, illustrating our ongoing willingness to negotiate in good faith.”

Grad students should vote no today and form an independent rank-and-file strike committee to resume their fight for the right to a good wage, full healthcare coverage and a full waiver of the university fees while extending their fight to include the abolition of tuition for all students. Grad students, undergraduates and full-time faculty should mount a united struggle to meet their collective demands.

Whatever the outcome of today’s vote, UIC graduate workers should draw the necessary lessons from their experiences in the strike. The struggle for the most elemental gains requires the formation of new organizations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, which will fight for the demands that educators and other workers need, not what the Democrats and unions say is affordable. The fight must be carried out in conjunction with a political struggle to secure healthcare, education, a quality standard of living and other social rights through the fight against capitalism and for the socialist reorganization of economic and political life.

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