

The political lessons of the University of Illinois graduate student strike

By Andy Thompson
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Last Tuesday, members of the Graduate Employees Organization Local 6297 (GEO), the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) graduate student union, voted to ratify a new contract with the University administration. The three-year deal increases the minimum salary for graduate student workers by \$2,550 over three years and provides some small reductions in university fees and cost of health care.

On the following Wednesday night, UIC's faculty union announced a 93 percent yes vote to authorize a strike. The faculty will continue bargaining with the administration, with the first day of a potential strike being April 26.

The GEO has proclaimed its agreement to be a massive success and the contract to be the best deal in the organization's history. However, the reality is that grad students at UIC will continue to struggle to meet basic cost-of-living expenses while working for a tier-1 research university.

The agreement in no way changes the basic fact of the massive exploitation of graduate students. Whatever the wage increases contained in the deal, they will be eaten up by fees. Pursuing a strategy based on appealing to the UIC administration and ultimately the Democratic Party, which oversees UIC, this sellout deal was the inevitable outcome.

Grad students demonstrated great courage in taking up this fight. However, from the outset, the unions sought to isolate and sabotage their struggle and prevent it from linking up with broader struggles of the working class.

Significantly, the GEO decided to call off the strike just as other sections of the UIC campus were rallying around the grad students. Undergraduate students at UIC, who overwhelmingly supported the strike, had planned class walkouts for Friday, April 5. Despite this,

the GEO shut down the strike the Thursday night before.

In addition, there was the UIC faculty union strike authorization vote. These developments were emerging well before the grad student agreement was finalized. There was a potential to unite the entire campus, undergraduates and graduates alike, with a simultaneous strike by the faculty. But instead, the decision was made to wrap up the strike before the situation could develop further.

One fact noted by supporters of the GEO in response to the perspective advanced by the *World Socialist Web Site* is that the American Federation of Teachers (AFT)/Illinois Federation of Teachers (IFT) played no role in the strike and that there was no support from the parent union. Indeed, the AFT/IFT did not provide any strike pay or funding to UIC grad students during their strike. Instead, the GEO had to set up a "Go Fund Me" to help students who struggled to make rent payments.

This poses the question to every UIC grad worker and every other educator currently under the AFT: Why pay union dues ?

Historically, one justification for the payment of union dues was to provide a strike fund for workers so they could continue to sustain themselves during a long strike period. Instead, as an affiliate of the AFT, the GEO has given more than a million dollars in membership dues throughout its existence to fund the salary and perks of the likes of AFT President Randi Weingarten, who takes in nearly half a million dollars a year, about the same amount paid to some of UIC's top administrators.

Under conditions where the AFT withheld strike pay and where the GEO leadership offered concessions to demonstrate their "willingness to bargain," it is no wonder that grad students felt they had little choice but

to ratify the deal they were presented, inadequate as it was.

Just days after the agreement, the administration is already looking for ways to punish students for the strike. Indeed, UIC's administration has yet to ratify the contract. Should they hold off on signing the agreement until May 3, the end of the semester, current grad workers will lose their retroactive pay raise. By carefully keeping the strike confined within the union bargaining process, this kind of legal end-run around the agreement could have been expected. The GEO having done its part, grad students are now at the mercy of the administration.

It should be stressed that the strike by UIC grad students was part of a broader movement internationally by educators in defense of public education as a whole.

The past year has seen a strike wave of teachers in the United States starting in West Virginia in February 2018 and continuing in Oklahoma, Kentucky, California and other areas. Now in Poland, hundreds of thousands of teachers have begun a national strike to protest austerity and social reaction.

In all of these struggles, including the UIC strike, the same basic issue is at play—public services like education are being starved of resources and driven to the brink of collapse while the global capitalist class of billionaires, like Illinois' Democratic Governor J.B. Pritzker, hoard the vast majority of society's wealth. Indeed, Pritzker manages the University of Illinois Board of Trustees and has appointed several members of its management board, largely corporate figures and wealthy investors.

This situation is the outcome of years of artificial suppression of the class struggle by trade unions such as the AFT, with which the GEO is affiliated through the IFT. In one struggle after another over the past 40 years, the unions have stepped in to either block strike action, or where that is not possible, to ensure that the conflict is isolated and subordinated to the Democratic Party.

Further, a host of pseudo-left organizations, such as the Democratic Socialists of America, have intervened to keep the struggles of teachers and other workers subordinated to the unions and the Democratic Party.

Based on their nationalist and pro-capitalist program, the unions are hostile to any expression by workers of

their independent interest and largely dependent on the patronage of sections of the ruling elite, primarily that faction oriented to the Democratic Party.

In return for the right to collect dues from their captive members, the unions serve the corporate bosses as a labor police force in the service of capitalism.

The experience of the last four decades by autoworkers, teachers, United Parcel Service workers, airline workers and others demonstrates that any workers' struggle that is kept within this framework of the trade unions is doomed to defeat.

The only way for graduate teaching assistants and all workers to meet their demands is to understand the enormous power they have and the complete antagonism of interests with the parasitic layer of billionaires and their servants in the union bureaucracy.

Only through an independent industrial and political movement of the working class can real gains be made. This requires that workers organize independently of the unions through building rank-and-file committees democratically elected among the workers themselves.

Grad students, and now UIC faculty, must conclude that there is no way forward within the framework being imposed by the unions. The fight to defend public education will not be won by appeals to the forces that are seeking to dismantle it. Educators must turn outward to the working class and to the youth to mount an independent fight to secure their basic rights to live, work, and teach. This can only be done by a conscious political movement of the working class to place the world's productive forces under democratic control to be used to meet the interests of social need, not private profit.

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