

The Final Countdown....

Contract expires in 10 days; GEO members must mobilize

10. Membership meeting

This Wednesday, Feb. 20, GEO members will decide whether to extend the current contract that expires on March 1 to extend bargaining.

Members will also get to discuss and vote on a strike platform that outlines the union's bottom line. Participants will also exchange ideas about potential job actions.

Come make your voice heard and work together with your fellow union members!

Contact your department steward or e-mail
umgeo@umich.edu with any questions.

9. Join Feb. 20 grade-in

To show the university community that we matter and to show each other we are strong, GSIs will be gathering to grade papers on the ground floor of Haven Hall by the main entrance near the elevators and posting wall on Wednesday Feb. 20 from 12:30 to 3:30 p.m. The grade-in will be a highly visible reminder of the work that GSIs do and serve as an educational opportunity for interested passers-by. The more GSIs who show up, the stronger message that we send.

Contact Kathleen Tipler at ktipler@umich.edu to sign up for a shift.

7. Spread the word on GEO

We need to make sure that we keep our fellow members of the university community informed about how important GSIs are and why our proposals are fair.

Bring up GEO in conversations with fellow GSIs, graduate students, undergraduates, professors, other university employees and members of the Ann Arbor Community. If you need help speaking up, or need ideas on how to respond to questions about GEO on contract talks, e-mail umgeo@umich.edu and a fellow member will get in touch with you.

8. Attend bargaining Thursday

Negotiations take place Thursday Feb. 21 from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. in the Great Lakes Room of Palmer Commons. We've had increasing turnouts the last two weeks and we need to keep getting more members to show the administration we care. Members can show up at their convenience and stay as long as they can.

Where negotiations stand now:

6. SALARIES:

GEO: 9 percent for the first year, cost-of-living adjustment matching inflation next two years

Administration: 2 percent each of three years.

Analysis: Currently, the UM Office of Financial Aid has estimated the cost of attendance for a graduate student for eight months to be \$15,980 – not including taxes, while a .5 GSI only makes \$15,199. GEO's proposed 9 percent raise would close that \$781 gap and account for taxes and inflation. The administration has claimed through their lead negotiator that "We looked at the [Financial Aid] number and didn't see how it fit or related to a normative .5 GSI. We don't think they had a GSI in mind when they came up with that number." GEO Lead Negotiator Colleen Woods called the administration's proposal "essentially a pay cut" when inflation is included.

5. HEALTH CARE

GEO: GEO has proposed expanded coverage for mental health care and physical therapy, which is currently limited. The Union has also requested for dental II coverage for all GSIs —an upgrade from the current Dental I, which only covers periodic exams— and vision coverage.

Administration: rejected all of GEO's initial proposed changes.

Analysis: GEO bargaining team member Spencer Piston said that "Our members say that health care is a high priority so we're holding firm until we see some concessions from the administration."

4. SUMMER BRIDGE PAY

GEO: "For both Term I and Term II, each employee shall receive a summer stipend in an amount equal to one half one month's pay. This stipend shall be payable on the occasion of the first paycheck of the employment period beginning May 1."

Administration: ~~"For both Term I and Term II, each employee shall receive a summer stipend in an amount equal to one half one month's pay. This stipend shall be payable on the occasion of the first paycheck of the employment period beginning May 1."~~

Analysis: GEO has argued that GSIs need summer support to improve time to degree and help international GSIs who cannot get non-university jobs. The union's plan would provide roughly \$2,000 per summer to a .5 fraction GSI who has worked both the preceding fall and winter terms. The administration does not recognize this need.

3. LOW FRACTION EQUITY

GEO: The union has proposed that fractions below .25 get all premiums paid for. Also .2 fractions would get a full tuition waiver, while other low fractions would receive a 10 percentage point increase in the amount of their waiver. Finally, GEO has proposed equalizing all hourly pay rates.

Administration: rejected GEO ideas

2. CHILD CARE/ PARENTAL LEAVE

GEO: Proposed eliminating arbitrary requirement that limits eligibility to parents whose spouses work 20 hours a week outside the home. International GSIs in particular tend to be excluded from the subsidy under this current policy. Proposed increasing maximum subsidy limits to \$2,600 per term for first child and \$1,400 for second child. The union has also proposed eight weeks of parental leave for new mothers and fathers of natural born and adopted children.

Administration: has rejected major GEO proposals as too costly, has argued that current system "is best way" to ensure that childcare needs get met. Administrators have indicated a willingness to talk about parental leave, although they are hesitant about its impact on the workings of departments.

1. DISABILITY ACCESS

GEO: provide a central advocate to help GSIs with disabilities to get the support that they need to properly teach in the classroom, has discussed several cases of GSIs who have failed to get their needs met and faced large amounts of bureaucracy in the process.

Administration: Argues that the current system that places burden on GSIs to contact their own supervisors, department administrators and the Office of Access and Equity about making accommodations is reasonable. Negotiators for the administration have also claimed that GEO changes would cost too much.

Remember most vulnerable in GEO

I want to thank the leaders at GEO for their research, bargaining and advocacy on our behalf, for their dedication and hard work. I am humbled by their sweat and time, particularly since I am engaged in large-scale planning and organizing myself this year.

My name is Ramon Stern. I am a GSI and a manic-depressive. I am enduring the trials of designing an English composition course this academic year while serving as co-chair for a large, professional conference. I am grading student papers as we speak.

My story may be a fairly common one for graduate students. Hopefully, it illuminates the importance of the “secondary” statistical elements on GEO’s platform: low fraction employees, child care, mental health care, abolishing the ten-term rule, etc. I wonder, if added together, how close these specific proposals for social protection and equity would come to a living wage in “importance.” Yet I digress.

In order to live fairly comfortably, I have had to take on odd jobs at the university tutoring language, translating book chapters and researching for my mentor. Yet I can only officially work an additional 10 hours per week at the university when on fellowship or employed as a GSI. I am told that working more would lead to burn out, but I know that this rule is primarily financially driven.

In my first year in graduate school, I found a cheap apartment that I share with a roommate on North Campus and have not left the place for close to 3 years. In spite of my fairly frugal spending habits, I receive modest assistance on occasion from my family, particularly to help me get through summers.

I have been lucky. I have very supportive mentors and specific skills I can use to make extra money from time to time. Even so, upon visiting my friends this winter break, I saw the tremendous financial gap between their earnings and mine, and their comparably opulent or privileged lifestyles. Many of them

can afford to go out to eat at least once a day, sometimes twice. When I get into such habits, my checkbook balance shrinks and shrivels up to dangerously low numbers.

Yet I am lucky. I have financially stable parents, fairly low costs and some modest options to build on my income.

An increase in wages would help me considerably, but would not make or break my financial stability. There is one particular need that constantly resurfaces: my mental health. The fairly good coverage of psychotherapy and medication here was the primary reason I chose to come to the University of Michigan. Even so, I walk a financial tightrope with my mental health.

My first year at graduate school was my

most stressful by far. I felt myself lapsing into a dangerous emotional place, yet I did not see a therapist until late in my second semester. Last semester, my visits expired because of summer therapy and I could not afford to pay the sliding fee. I only realized that my old insurance had expired and reapplied for coverage when I tried to pay for medication and was turned away.

Navigating the university’s mental health system has been the most challenging obstacle to me. When I am most stressed is often when I have to move through the most hurdles. Before having such serious mental health needs, I never appreciated health care needs on the same level. I never had the same claim to financial and social vulnerability. This insensitivity on my part was not due to any lack of political knowledge and education on social issues, but a lack of personal experience.

Protecting the most vulnerable is a cornerstone of sensible policy and a priority for safeguarding equity. Those living on .2 fractions, paying for child care, stretched thin by mental health needs, and the unemployed due to the ten-term rule, should have priority in our considerations. Though each individual issue may not be “popular”, when added together I would claim that the particularly vulnerable are not as small a minority as might appear. If all of us need a living wage, where does that leave those of us with particularly pressing needs?

— Ramon Stern

*GSI, Comparative Literature
Conference Co-chair, SCOR
(Students of Color of Rackham)*

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GEO Bargaining Sessions:

Feb. 21, 11-5 p.m. Palmer Commons, Great Lakes Room

Let the administration know that we’re paying attention and want them to start taking us seriously. Come and stay for as long as you can -- even an hour helps.

Remember: THE UNION ONLY SUCCEEDS WITH YOU

FROM THE GRASS ROOTS: Monica Patterson

How long have you been actively involved with GEO?

I've been active in GEO since I started grad school. I was here when we had that big action with the construction workers [three years ago], which was great. I went to South Africa for over two years doing my field work, but I participated in a really successful strike before I left.

What has motivated your participation in the union?

I've seen what the union does for its members, for lots of different members. I like that we fight for "special interests"—people with disabilities, parents, international students... that's inspiring and important to me as a person and as a citizen of the world. [And] it's important to me to have a space where I can fuse my teaching with activism.

How long has activism been part of your background?

I had done a lot of activism in undergrad at Swarthmore, but that really thinned out when I got to grad school. But it's been important to me to keep well-

"We don't have a living wage.... I feel like teaching is valued at an abstract level, but not at the level of what we're paid."

rounded. It's easy for me here [at Michigan], because there are so many people [in GEO] who are so committed. The union has a history that's really active and really strong—it's nice to be part of something that runs so smoothly. ... [Also], my

family's all in education, so they're really supportive. I don't have to be worried about telling them what's happening when they ask what's going on with the negotiations.

What's your relationship with your department like in the context of the current negotiations?

I'm really lucky in my department. We have a lot of support from the faculty, so I feel like it's easier for me [to support GEO]. Some people have a really difficult, awkward decision to make. We all have different stakes, different levels of [commitment].

How did your field work contribute to your dedication to GEO when you got back?

I work in South Africa, and the history of the country is hugely impacted by the labor movement. The history of apartheid there... it was one of the most abject, unfair, and despicable systems in the world, and it only ended 17 years ago. It was nice to be involved in a place where activism is so alive.

Are there any issues GEO is currently bargaining for that are of particular importance to you?

Oh, yeah. The issue of a living wage—it's huge. We don't have a living wage. I compare myself to friends who don't go to grad school, who work in business, and it's totally different for them. I couldn't afford to get a dog, a car, buy any property, have a child—not that that's a priority at the moment—but I can't afford any of these things my friends my age are able to buy. I work really hard. I feel like teaching is valued at an abstract level, but not at the level of what we're paid.

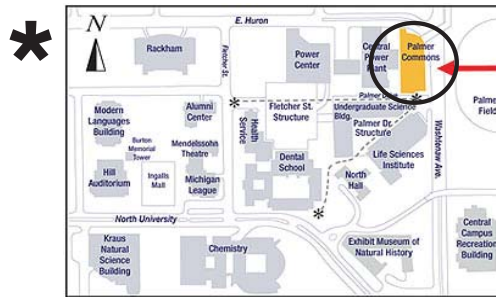
Patterson is a PhD candidate in Anthropology and History

GEO

February 2008
GRADUATE EMPLOYEES ORGANIZATION

BARGAINING SESSIONS (Feb 7, 14, and 21) EVERY THURSDAY 11am-5pm

Palmer Commons, Great Lakes Room



*Where in the world is Palmer Commons, you might ask?



GRADUATE EMPLOYEES ORGANIZATION

Membership Meeting

Wednesday, Feb. 20, 7 p.m.
Rackham Amphitheater

Questions? Email umgeo@umich.edu