

## UM rejects GEO pay proposals

### University also ignores ideas to provide better health care

During the Jan. 31 talks, UM negotiators summarily rejected all of GEO's financial proposals.

In most cases, administrators made no attempt to engage with the union's ideas and simply struck all of the union's proposals.

At one point during the session, GEO Bargaining team member Spencer Piston incredulously asked university negotiators if they had left in any of the union's proposals.

"None of the expansions have been preserved," university lead negotiator Ronald Dick said.

"I am disappointed by your proposals," GEO Lead Negotiator Colleen Woods told UM negotiators, adding she was dismayed it took nearly six weeks of research by administrators on some articles to merely cross out GEO's language.

The centerpiece of UM's proposals was a 2 percent wage increase for each of the next three years.

GEO had proposed 9 percent wages increases each year.

"I read this as a pay cut" when factoring in inflation, Woods said.

According to the *Washington Post*, inflation nationally was running at 4.1 percent in the third quarter of 2007.

Raises in the current GEO contract have been 2.5, 3 and 3 percent.

The university ignored GEO's argument that the current two-semester salary of a .5 fraction GSI \$15,199 is \$781 less than the UM Office of Financial Aid's estimate of the cost of attendance and needs substantial increases.

Dick declared that university administrators found the Office of Financial Aid's estimates to be "irrelevant" to GSI pay and not connected to the teaching budget.

"So do you think this 2 percent increase is enough for a GSI to live on?" GEO negotiator Spencer Piston asked.

"With this and the other articles in the contract, we think there will be absolutely enough." Dick replied.

UM also rejected every GEO proposal for expanded access, reasonable compensation,

"Do you think this 2 percent raise will be enough for a GSI to live on?"

– **Spencer Piston**

*GEO bargaining team member, on UM's salary offer*

"We think there will absolutely be enough."

– **Ronald Dick**

*University of Michigan lead negotiator*

equity in health care, as well as other funding proposals.

The union had proposed summer bridge pay to help alleviate the chronic lack of funding graduate employees at UM experience during the summer in comparison with peer institutions.

UM crossed out all the language in the article.

It did the same for language that the union said would have equalized the pay scale for low-fraction GSIs, removed arbitrary registration fees and increased tuition waivers for low-fraction GSIs.

Also, the university rejected GEO proposals to expand coverage for mental health care and physical therapy. It removed proposed GEO expansions to dental and vision care.

Union officials noted according to their calculations that extending free health care coverage to low-fraction GSIs would cost \$170,000 a year. Extending Dental II coverage and vision care to all employees would cost \$270,000 and \$195,000 per year, respectively. Each proposal would cost considerably less than the \$500,000 bonus paid out of discretionary funding last year to Robert Kelch, the director of UM's health system.

Dick explained that university resources were "not limitless" and added that expansions in some sections of GEO's contract needed to be counterbalanced by economy in others.

GEO bargaining team member Emma Gar-

### Talk to the hand:

Listed are a just a few major GEO proposals UM rejected outright last week:

- Summer bridge pay
- Mental health coverage
- Dental care
- Vision care
- PT coverage
- parental leave
- expanded tuition waivers
- waiving fees
- paid training

rett said she was puzzled by Dick's reasoning. "I don't see us having economic gains in any of our proposals," she said. "You are implying that we are asking for money that is being funneled to other proposals. You are proposing a 2 percent raise, which is actually a pay cut for us And you say you can't expand benefits because it would cost money. But I'm not seeing any give and take on any front from the university. Your logic seems really circular," she added.

# What's next for GEO if UM doesn't budge?

A current of frustration with UM administration infused the Jan. 31 GEO membership meeting in the Rackham Amphitheater. After hearing about the university's latest rejections of GEO's contract proposals — including its requests for a living wage, fair child care subsidies, and better health care coverage — reactions among the attendees ranged from cautious disapproval to moral outrage.

The meeting began with a bargaining update from GEO lead negotiator Colleen Woods, who informed members that the University has essentially rejected every contract proposal GEO has advanced.

In the face of the administration's recalcitrance, which many

members said amounts to flagrant disrespect for its graduate employees, discussion focused on GEO's priorities. The union's request for a 9 percent wage increase provoked the most discussion. One member, who said she has raised funds for graduate students through an LSA initiative, pointed out the irony of raising money to fill a salary gap that shouldn't exist in the first place.

"First I was grateful because I was happy they were raising money for us, but I realized that this is not a gift, but a *right*," she said. "We have a right to a living wage — we shouldn't have to be grateful."

Discussion also focused on issues affecting particular groups in the GEO population. Many attendees expressed a desire to prioritize union members like low-fraction GSIs and parents, even if they weren't members of

those groups. "Different people have particularly pressing needs," said Ramon Stern, a student in comparative literature.

For example, several Art & Design students described their department's "culture of fear," in which GSIs are discouraged from asking for fair

compensation. These employees said they often work in excess of their .2 fractions, which are well below other departments' .5 allotments. However, "[we're told that] if we complain about what we have, we'll lose it," said a student who identified herself as Amadaeus. Her colleague, Lindsay Stern, added that after she pays for health care, her monthly take-home pay is only \$575.

Members had various opinions about whether GEO should remain committed to its current set of requests, or prioritize them in order to gain ground in the negotiations. Some students, like Stephen Sparks of anthropology and history, felt the union ought to stick to its guns.

"We should say we're not budging, and we're not going to choose," he said. Many agreed, and some suggested that holding up the possibility of a job action (like withholding grades, a walkout, or a strike) would show the administration that the union is serious, committed and unified in its goals.

Angie Parker, a history student, wanted to see more negotiating on GEO's side. "We do have a responsibility as adults to come up with a set of priorities," she said.

Megan Biddinger, former GEO president, noted that "this is an awkward point in negotiations, and we're going to need to have some tense conversations. But," she added, "we're all fighting for the same thing."

GEO President Helen Ho agreed with Biddinger's appeal to coherence. "If you decide to go on strike, it's shouldn't necessarily be for your own self-interests, but also for the needs of others in the union. That's solidarity," she said.

Members' next chance to show their solidarity will be on Feb. 21 in the Michigan League Ballroom.

**"We should say we're not budging, and we're not going to choose."**

**— Stephen Sparks  
GEO member  
Anthropology & History**

## FROM THE GRASS ROOTS: Josh Mound

For Josh Mound, a second-year graduate student in History and Sociology, contract negotiations literally run in his blood. His father is the president of the police patrolmen's union in Boardman, Ohio.

"We've had a lot of conversations about bargaining strategies, what works and what doesn't," he said after the Jan. 31 bargaining session between GEO and UM.

Mound is facing his first contract negotiations with GEO.

"I wanted to be on the bargaining team, but I was just too busy," he said. Instead, Mound has been supporting the union by showing up at negotiation sessions and designing fliers to promote member attendance at bargaining sessions.

Based on what he's seen so far, Mound said the union needs to predict the University's arguments in order to prepare to refute them more effectively.

"One [argument] that I expect them to use is that poor economic times and the state budget crunch make it difficult to give us decent pay," he said. "It's a completely illegitimate claim, but we need to be ready to counter it."

Mound said he has been impressed by the number of people he's seen at bargaining sessions.

"There are many people who consistently show up, and I've been seeing many new faces too," he said.

He also emphasized the importance of talking to GEO members who haven't witnessed negotiations to keep them informed

and help them move toward becoming more involved.

"There were two people across the hall who happened to be curious about what's going on and started to get interested," Mound said. "And I saw them at bargaining last week."

Does it make a difference to have many people at bargaining?

"It gives our bargaining team a morale advantage to have a lot of people in that room," he said. "It

**"It gives our bargaining team a morale advantage to have a lot of people in the room. It helps because there are 50 or 60 of us and only eight of them."**

helps because there are 50 or 60 of us and only eight or 10 of them," he added with a grin.

# In search of UM's side of the story...

When the university rejected GEO's demand for a 9 percent wage increase to make up the difference between what the UM Office of Financial Aid says a graduate student needs to live on and current GSI pay, university officials suggested that the Office of Financial Aid's numbers were irrelevant to any contract proposals. We were confused by this statement, so we asked for a clarification. As you can see, we didn't get very far:

*(Editor's note: This is an excerpt taken from GEO's official transcript of the Jan. 31 bargaining session. The following exchange took place after the administration proposed a 2 percent pay increase for each of the next three years.)*

**WOODS:** Thank you for your proposal. I find your wage proposals disappointing. We gave you a set of numbers that had a strong rationale behind them. We didn't pick these out of the air; we took them from the UM Financial Aid Web site.

**Mr. DICK:** [These numbers] were not prepared for us as part of this contract. They are something like 5 percent over current, and 9 percent over three years compounded would overshoot that.

**WOODS:** [2 percent raises] would put us below the rate of inflation. I read this as a pay cut.

**Mr. DICK:** The Office of Financial Aid number has not been something factored into this contract. I know they have been up and down over the years.

**WOODS:** We did talk to them, and I believe they adjust their numbers every year. I have with me numbers from 2003 up until this year, and they gave us their method for how they figure out that number each year.

**Mr. DICK:** This office does not affect the

teaching budget of the university. I looked at their number and didn't see how it fit or related to a normative .5 GSI. I don't think they had GSI in mind when they came up with that number

**PISTON:** Is it your position that the numbers given by office of financial aid are too high? That is actually enough for a grad student to live on?

**Mr. DICK:** No, I'm not arguing with their number. I'm arguing that their number was not decided in the context of this contract.

**PISTON:** Is their number an accurate reflection?

**Mr. DICK:** I'm not going to take a position on that number. It isn't a number developed within the context of this contract

**CASSIDY:** So that number is irrelevant with regards to our salary?

**Mr. DICK:** I think that this number has been treated by both parties historically as neither a starting or ending point. You don't use it in your proposal – your other 9 percent raises far eclipse that number. If that number was a goal, it didn't show itself in that proposal

**PISTON:** Do you believe that this 2 percent increase would be adequate for a grad student to live on?

**Mr. DICK:** The money that is here, and in

other articles, will be absolutely adequate.

**PISTON:** In this proposal specifically?

**Mr. DICK:** This proposal needs to be viewed in the context of other proposals.

....

**WOODS:** I don't think that you gave me an answer to make up the gap on the financial aid Web page. As a grad student coming here you go to that site, and when you see the difference between this site and the package you will feel misled.

**Mr. DICK:** If your proposal is that it [that number] should [match up with Financial Aid's estimates], we will look at that within the context of all your other financial proposals.

**CASSIDY:** It's the number that the financial aid office informs the federal government on. For the history dept. I am only able to qualify for \$250 worth of government loans. I would have to go to a high-interest rate private loan. That number does directly impact other sources of funding, like getting student loans. I got a letter saying 95 percent of my loans have been cancelled.

**Mr. DICK:** Moving to Article 11...

**WOODS:** I also just want to make clear to everyone in the room that we also got Article 29, Summer Bridge Pay, that was entirely crossed out.

## GEO Bargaining sessions:

Feb. 7, 14, 21 11-5 p.m. Palmer Commons, Great Lakes Room

Let UM know that we're paying attention and want them to start taking us seriously.

Come and stay for as long as you can -- even a half hour helps.

**Remember: THE UNION ONLY SUCCEEDS WITH YOU**

How have negotiations been going so far?

To illustrate, here's a typical sample of a proposal GEO has made and the university's response to it:

## GEO proposal:

### **ARTICLE XXVIII: SUMMER BRIDGE PAY:**

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

## UM counterproposal:

### ~~ARTICLE XXVIII: SUMMER BRIDGE PAY:~~

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

Judge for yourself.

-- The Editors,  
*At the Table*