

# Questions and Answers about a possible strike or job action by GEO

## **How will the decision to perform a job action be made?**

Ongoing discussions about possible job actions or a strike will occur in membership meetings, Stewards Council meetings, bargaining caucuses, Organizing Committee meetings and department meetings. If the consensus that emerges from those conversations is that we should go forward with a job action, then a membership meeting will be held at which the membership will be asked to authorize a strike vote. If a strike vote is authorized at that meeting then a strike ballot will be sent out to the entire GEO membership via email.

In order to have the option of putting together a significant job action, we need to be organizing toward that action now. This means that you may be asked soon, or may already have been asked, to commit to taking part in a job action. When it comes time to vote, only vote 'yes' if you're willing to participate in the job action (incl. a strike). If the strike authorization passes & a strike is called, you will be expected to honor the strike, even if you personally voted 'no'. The GEO membership makes decisions as a group – that's the essence of a collective bargaining unit. The results are binding on all members.

## **What is a job action? Is it different from a strike?**

Any action in which we use our labor power to put pressure on the Administration is a job action. A strike is a job action in which we walk off the job and withhold our labor for an indefinite period of time. We sometimes use terms like "strike ballot", "strike platform", and "strike vote" even when the job action being considered is something short of an open-ended strike.

## **What are the different possibilities for what a job action might look like?**

Here are several kinds of job actions that graduate employee unions have tried or considered:

- *Grade strike*: Withholding grades at the end of the semester.
- *Rolling strike*: Withholding labor in selected departments, and changing which departments that is from day to day.
- *Targeted walkout*: Withholding labor in selected departments or buildings, typically for a limited duration.
- *One-day walkout*: Walking off the job for a single day.
- *Multiple-day walkout*: Two or three day work stoppage.
- *Open-ended strike*: Refusing to teach until and only when the university offers us a contract worth signing.

## **Is a strike legal?**

No, not for public employees in Michigan. This is why we will let the contract lapse before calling a job action. They can apply for an injunction to compel us to work. If we refuse to comply with a court injunction, the Union could be subject to fines, and leadership could be jailed.

**Does that mean we can't walk out?**

No! But we should be aware of worst case scenarios and we should do what we feel is right in terms of getting a fair contract. Recently, Detroit teachers refused to comply with a court injunction without significant penalty. In 1991 we held 2 successful job actions *under* contract and were not penalized. While injunctions don't take long to get, the university doesn't have to ask for one, and the judge doesn't have to grant one. The severity and duration of a job action would influence whether the university would seek and/or get an injunction.

**What's this about a contract extensions?**

Until the negotiations reach an impasse, it's best to keep the contract in place. If the contract lapses, wages and benefits would remain in force as long as we continue to work. If there were a strike they could consider minor reprisals, but suspending our wages and benefits would be politically damaging for the university.

**If there is a walkout, will we get paid?**

The university does not have to pay us for hours not worked. Legally, they can withhold a day's pay for every day not worked. *But* in the past they have NOT done this, we have been paid even for days on strike. It is VERY difficult for the university to figure out who exactly missed how many days and to calculate the amount to be deducted from a thousand or more paychecks at different fraction allocations. The longer a job action goes, the more likely that pay could be deducted, so it's best to be prepared, just in case.

**What about job security?**

Hundreds of GSI's cannot easily be replaced. Because striking is illegal, the university would be within their legal rights to fire us – although we could appeal this. While we cannot count on it, UM doesn't have a history of penalizing individuals. We would also demand that our new contract include a 'no reprisals' clause. The university honored this clause in the 1991 contract after two job actions.

**Would our health care and tuition waivers be affected?**

While UM hasn't done this before, they could decide to terminate our health insurance in a *protracted* strike. Coverage usually lasts to the end of the month in which it has been terminated. We would have up to a month before anyone would be affected. If it went past that, we would be covered by COBRA benefits (meaning we could opt to pay our own coverage at the group rate). It's highly unlikely that a strike would go that long. Once the university has granted and processed the tuition waivers for the term, they cannot be revoked.

**Has GEO ever gone on strike?**

In its 38 year history, GEO has *authorized* several strikes; it has only actually *called* a strike once. In 1975, GEO went on strike for 4 weeks to win our first contract with the university. In 1987, 1991 and 1993, affirmative strike authorization votes were enough to win acceptable contracts and ensure the integrity of the Union. During each of the last several contract campaigns, GEO has held one day walkouts.

**Is withholding our labor ‘moral’?**

Yes! Ask yourself: do I deserve a living wage and respect for the work I do? Do my students deserve to be taught by a GSI who is not overworked, underpaid or suffering from mental health problems? Do we as graduate students deserve support that will enable us to finish our degrees and become trained professionals, without going into debt?

**What will happen if I don’t participate in a job action?**

If a work stoppage is called and you choose to continue teaching, you will be crossing the picket line. This undermines the effectiveness of the action. You would weaken the morale of GSI’s who do strike their labor and would send a message to the university that you don’t support the bargaining team at the table and indicate that you would be satisfied with a mediocre contract.

**What if I don’t want to stop working but I still want to support the walkout?**

As a member of GEO you have to make an individual decision whether or not to respect the union’s strike authorization and honor the work stoppage. If you feel you can’t take the risk of walking out, but want to support the other GSI’s who do strike, there are certainly things you can do – such as walking the picket line or contacting other unions on campus to make sure they honor our picket lines. These actions are supportive, but not as effective as actually withholding your labor.

**Can I teach classes outside the university, in a coffee house or my apartment?**

No. This would be considered crossing the picket line just as it would be if you taught your class on campus, even though it would be less visible. It would work against GSI’s efforts for a better contract.

**Can I go to my own classes and continue with my research if we walkout?**

No. Our aim in a strike or walkout is to shut down the university. We want to have as strong an effect as possible throughout the university. We will be asking our students to not go to classes; we can’t expect them to respect our picket line if we cross it ourselves.

**Won’t a strike or walkout just hurt undergrads and not the administration?**

Withholding our labor sends a powerful message to the administration; it is the most effective tool that we have in negotiating a contract. Undergrads may miss a few valuable classes in the short term. In the long term, however, all undergrads will benefit from a better GEO contract – which is why we would strike. Many of GEO proposals will benefit undergrads directly – better paid GSI’s are better teachers!

**Would the Administration try to get someone to teach our classes?**

Yes. The administration would direct department chairs to develop strike contingency plans. However, the chances that professors or other GSI’s would be willing and able to teach all our classes and do all our grading are slim. It is unlikely that the administration would attempt or be able to hire replacement workers.

**Would I be branded as a trouble-maker and be fired or never get another job?**

Our strength comes from standing together. We need to make sure that everyone is on board so no-one can be singled out. The administration would want to minimize the damage of a strike and

would warn departments against retaliation. The Union would react strongly against threats or intimidation and would demand a no-reprisals clause as a condition of returning to work. Don't assume that faculty and administrators would be angry or attempt to punish striking GSIs. Many would respect our decision.

### **What is the status of International GSIs in the event of a strike?**

It is illegal for public employees to go on strike in the state of Michigan. *However*, no individual GSI (citizen or non-citizen) at this university has been arrested for going on strike. In any case, it is the union's leadership, *not* its individual members, who would be subject to any potential legal repercussions. GEO discourages IGSI's from participating in acts of civil disobedience (such as chaining yourself to private property) which may lead to arrest. Ordinary job actions or strikes do not include such acts of civil disobedience. While some members of the university community might put pressure on IGSI's not to strike, the University is unlikely to take specific action against international GSIs. There are no precedents for IGSI's losing immigrant status or being deported because of participation in strikes. IGSI's make up 25% of the GEO members so retaliation would be difficult. IGSI's are an integral part of the university community, so retaliation would be highly controversial.

### **How much leverage do we have with the administration?**

GSIs teach up to 40% of the class hours at this university. GSIs also perform a majority of campus grading and evaluation. Without our work the university can't function. Instead of teaching, we would be picketing – the union membership would participate in actions that would hinder the normal operation of all sectors of the U, including picketing academic and administrative buildings and blocking strategically located loading docks. The Teamsters Unions have historically respected our picket lines by not crossing them, and we've already begun reaching out to other campus unions in an effort to ensure that their members will respect our picket lines.

### **What do we have to gain?**

A fair and equitable contract for all our members! The salary and benefits and respect we all deserve – and in fact, need – in order to provide the highest quality education for our students and ourselves. Ultimately, our greatest power is our power to strike. When the university refuses to be reasonable, the power the bargaining team brings to the table is the potential for 1700 graduate student workers to walk off the job.

### **Any other questions or concerns?**

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