

## Statement to ISU Academic Senate

### ISU Graduate Workers Union Announce Need for Strike Readiness

Based on an analysis of the bargaining and mediation to date, the bargaining team of the ISU Graduate Workers Union (GWU) believes it is necessary for our union to move into strike readiness.

We in the bargaining team believe in full transparency and have an obligation to tell the truth to our members and our broader coalition of solidarity across campus and the Bloomington-Normal community. The truth is that we are far away from ISU on an economic package that will confront the poverty and debt that TAs live in as a result of working and studying at ISU. The truth is that we are far away from ISU on a contract that will protect our many international workers from discrimination on the basis of citizenship or immigration status. The truth is that we are far away from ISU on a contract that protects TAs' right to free speech. The truth is that we are far away from ISU because they refuse to take our concerns seriously, and in this refusal further endanger already endangered TAs.

The bargaining process began in October 2019 when the GWU gave a package of economic and non-economic proposals to ISU. It took ISU 14 months to fully respond, and when they did respond, it was only to keep pace with state minimum wage law, and only gave raises to a small percentage of TAs. It did nothing to address the overwhelming poverty and debt TAs encounter by coming to work and study at ISU. Now, in March 2021, we have been in mediation for two months with little to no movement. Our TAs are still struggling as a global pandemic rages and ISU sees surprise surpluses it refuses to spend to take us out of poverty. Again, today in mediation, we made a major move, showing our willingness to bargain, but ISU again refused to make us an offer with raises for all TAs.

ISU gives us offer after offer that does absolutely nothing to address the danger they put us in. They do nothing to confront our danger, poverty and debt because they do not see it as a problem. In fact, the poverty and debt of teaching assistants is how ISU thrives. Our poverty is not a problem they want to solve. It's a problem they want to continue. They don't care that graduate students made a food pantry for graduate students to deal with the rampant food insecurity. They don't care about the tens of thousands of dollars in debt TAs go into to pay for rent, food, housing, healthcare.

We announce a need to move into strike readiness not because we believe a strike is imminent. We announce the need for strike readiness because we have assessed our situation in bargaining/mediation in combination with where we need to go to win a contract that addresses the everyday survival concerns of our 400+ person bargaining unit. We are committed to securing a contract that immediately makes our lives better and more secure.

Based on this assessment, we believe we need to enter a new phase of escalation called strike readiness. Strike readiness is not about the certainty of a strike. It's about signaling to our members and broader coalition that we need to enter a new phase of escalation where we prepare for the possibility of a strike. Strike readiness says: if we believe a strike might be possible, we have an obligation to prepare for a strike because otherwise we will not get where we need to go. We can't afford to fall short in our fight for a contract for TAs. We urgently need to win a contract for the 400+ TAs many of whom are in poverty and debt from working and studying at ISU.

An important part of strike readiness is also educating our members and the public on the process, and distinctions between strike readiness, strike authorization, and an actual strike.

We need to be in a position to withhold our labor. Given the magnitude of the poverty and debt our members face, and ISU's willingness to accept the exploitation that threatens our survival and the education of our students, the GWU needs to be ready to rapidly put in place the many factors serious strike-readiness requires. If necessary, the union needs to be ready to take a strike authorization vote, and, if the members decide to do so, conduct a strike.

A strike authorization vote and, if needed, a strike, could create the political leverage needed to prevail against the challenges and dangers TAs face by coming to work and study at ISU. At its strongest, such action could create enough public and institutional pressure to force ISU to raise stipends and eliminate fees; to provide an expanded, less expensive healthcare plan, to provide protections for international workers so that they can work and study without fear of deportation.

A strike by the Graduate Workers Union, if strategically planned and strongly supported by our members, would disrupt business as usual where ISU thrives on the poverty of TAs. A strike would aim to make our crisis as TAs a crisis for ISU, for President Dietz, for the Board of Trustees, pressuring them to act to take our members out of the poverty and debt that is an engine of ISU's success. While a strike would necessarily disrupt our students' lives, it would also be an education in itself—seeing TAs in collective struggle to make our lives better, to confront the university as an exploiter and oppressor, to make a stand for the value of our labor and for public education: all under the recognition that our poverty as TAs can't be separated from their learning experience as undergraduates.

Even though strike-readiness is not a strike, being strike-ready means preparing for the risks as well as assessing the potential gains of an actual strike. Preparation involves listening to members in every job title, at every level of salary and job security, and holding honest conversations, one by one. It involves careful work to learn the concerns and capacities of our members. It involves setting benchmarks for measurements of readiness and meeting those benchmarks before moving forward. It involves consolidating the strong relationships the Graduate Workers Union is creating with undergraduates, with non-tenure-track faculty, with tenure-track faculty, with clerical workers, with buildings and trades workers, with alumni, with elected officials. It would involve systematically talking to community members in the communities ISU serves and explaining the urgency of strike readiness. And, critically important, it would involve building on the serious work our union is beginning to do with undergraduate students to discuss and create support for a strike based on the solidarity that graduate teaching conditions are undergraduate learning conditions.

The world we live in after the pandemic will be shaped by our actions now.

We are in legitimate crisis, but we believe this crisis presents a unique opportunity to reshape the university so that it does not thrive off the poverty of some of its most exploited workers: graduate teaching assistants sit at the bottom of the campus power hierarchy.

We are exploited as both students and workers, and have very little power to do anything about it--except via our collective action.

We believe that in confronting the poverty of TAs, one of the lowest classes of workers on campus, we need to bring together a coalition of forces that can intervene on the exploitation that has long haunted ISU and doomed so many workers to a life of danger.

We believe in a rising tide of solidarity from all workers at ISU coming together to fight for and with one another against a Board of Trustees, against a Dietz administration that thrives off the poverty and insecurity of the workers who make the university possible.