

Graduate student workers rally and 'work-in' following strike vote

By STEFAN OSTRACH
Special Correspondent

EUGENE — Graduate student workers at the University of Oregon (UO) clogged up the halls of the Administration Building for three hours May 23, part of a “work-in” prior to a rally outside. Members of the Graduate Teaching Fellows Federation (GTFF), American Federation of Teachers Local 3544, voted earlier in the week to authorize a strike.

GTFF President Joe Henry told the rally that the “work-in” was “to show the administration the hard work we do.” While careful not to obstruct passage as they sat on the floor grading papers, the work-in participants hinted at the disruption that a strike could cause.

The GTFF represents more than 1,500 graduate student teachers and researchers at UO. The strike vote was held after the administration’s outside lawyer broke off talks on May 14. At an emergency general membership meeting, members decided to conduct a secret ballot vote on whether or not to authorize a strike. More than 60 percent of the members voted, and 98 percent of them voted in favor of authorizing a strike.

“It’s different now. It’s different than it was two years ago,” Brianna Bertoglio, vice president of operations and a graduate student in the Education Department, explained before the rally.



ABOVE: Graduate student workers hold a “work-in” near the doors of the office of the president of the University of Oregon. The first floor of Johnson Hall, the Administration Building, was clogged with AFT Local 3544 members demonstrating their resolve after 98 percent voted to authorize a strike. ABOVE RIGHT: Later, at a rally outside the Administration Building, students express solidarity with graduate student workers. (Photos by Stefan Ostrach)

“We’ve been doing a lot of canvassing to reach out, to educate, to inform. Truly, people who have never been involved, who never had any interest, once they become aware of what’s going on and how it affects them, have really been pouring in.”

At the rally, Henry stressed that the strike vote resulted from “lots of deliberation.”

“Our organization, unlike the administration, is democratically run,” he

said. “It was a very serious choice that we made.”

GTFF negotiator Amber Cooper reported on the four key unresolved issues, the first being wages. Average GTFF pay is less than the university itself says is necessary to live in Eugene. Cooper said the administration’s wage proposal would not allow workers to reach a living wage until 2041. The other issues are keeping a cap on student fees, getting major dental insur-

ance coverage, and paid sick leave. Even though one-third of the GTFs have unaddressed dental issues, the administration refuses to consider including it in the insurance package. Even worse, their proposal would require cutting existing benefits.

“Going after our health care was a big mistake,” said Bertoglio. “Health care is a big priority.”

Leaders of other unions on campus addressed the rally, including Carla Mc-

Nally, Chapter 085 president of Service Employees International Union Local 503, representing classified staff. And Michael Dreiling, president of United Academics (AFT, AAUP), representing faculty.

“You all keep this place working,” Dreiling told the graduate student workers. “Faculty could not do their job without you. Students could not learn without you. The university grinds to a halt without you.”

No strike will happen before the fall. The mediation step required by state law has not yet taken place, and the GTFF bylaws prohibit decisions from being made during the summer, when many members are not on campus.

In a prepared statement, Andy Berglund, Associate Dean of the UO Graduate School, said, “The university remains committed to reaching an agreement as soon as possible that is fair and equitable for GTFs and responsibly reflects fiscal realities.”

On the other hand, Matthew Hanna, an outgoing GTFF vice president warned: “If this isn’t resolved we’re going to stick it out until we win.”

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