

Graduate teachers at UO on the verge of a strike

EUGENE — Graduate Teaching Fellows Federation (GTFF) Local 3544 has reached impasse in bargaining with the University of Oregon. Union members voted the week of Oct. 20-24 to authorize a strike. Seven hundred and twenty-one members cast ballots, with 86 percent supporting a walkout.

It was the second strike authorization vote taken by the bargaining unit, an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).

In May, more than 60 percent of the membership turned out for an emergency meeting called after UO's \$295-an-hour contract lawyer broke off talks. Bargaining for a new two-year agreement began in November 2013, and GTFs were working under terms of the previous contract, which expired in March 2014. At the meeting, members conducted a secret ballot vote on whether or not to authorize a strike. It passed by a 98 percent margin. A week later GTFs held a "work in" on campus to demonstrate to the university the disruption a strike would cause.

Local 3544 represents about 1,500 graduate student teachers and researchers who teach a third of the classes, work in labs, and do other academic work at the University of Oregon. Approximately 400 GTFs are non-members who pay a "fair share" fee. But that number is getting smaller as more and more join the union, said Local 3544 President Joe Henry, an anthropology doctoral student at the university.

After talks broke down in May, a state mediator brought the sides to-



Graduate student workers at the University of Oregon held a "work-in" last May near the doors of the office of the president to demonstrate what a strike would look like. A week prior, the members of GTFF Local 3544 had voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike. On Nov. 3, the union declared impasse in bargaining, starting the clock on a 30-day cooling off period, after which they can strike. (File photo by Stefan Ostrach)

gether for two bargaining sessions over the summer. During that time the university moved on several issues — agreeing to include dental coverage in their health and welfare package, keeping a cap on student fees, and closing the gap on wage hikes.

GTFs are prohibited from working beyond part-time status. They log anywhere from 8 to 20 hours per week. Pay ranges from \$900 to \$1,200 a month, depending on what tier they're in (Tier 1, Tier 2, or Tier 3).

Nearly 56 percent of graduate stu-

dents are paid at the minimum wage rate, which falls more than \$200 below what the University of Oregon's own Financial Aid Office estimates is necessary to live in Eugene (\$1,400 a month), Henry said.

"These costs are tied directly to rent, utilities, groceries and academic supplies," Henry noted.

The union is seeking a 5.5 percent raise to the minimum graduate employee salaries for each of the next two years in order to begin to close the gap between wages and the cost of living.

Following mediation, the university reportedly upped its offer to 5 percent the first year and 4 percent in year two.

But one key issue remains unresolved — paid sick/parental leave.

"Minimal paid leave is not a radical proposal," Henry said. "Most industrial nations have secured paid leave, both medical and parental."

The union wants up to two weeks of paid medical/parental leave per year. GTFs lack any paid medical or parental leave even though other part-time employee groups at the university are covered.

Henry said the union calculated the cost to cover minimal paid leave for all 1,500 GTFs to be \$52,000 a year.

"This is affordable for an administration carrying a \$65 million surplus in their budget. They have stated that their opposition is a matter of 'principle' rather than cost," Henry said.

Henry said graduate teachers do not stand alone in their fight. The Executive Committee of Chapter 085 of Service Employees International Union Local 503, the union representing classified staff at the university, submitted a letter in support of Local 3544's proposals. United Academics, the faculty union, has submitted a letter to Interim President Scott Coltrane calling for a fair settlement. And last week, the University Faculty Senate passed a resolution encouraging the

UO administration to settle a contract that appropriately addresses the needs of graduate employees.

A 30-day "cooling off" period began Oct. 27. When that expires on Thanksgiving Day, the union can strike.

At the web site, UO Matters, blogger Bill Harbaugh, a university professor, posted a confidential memo from UO Senior Vice Provost Doug Blandy that outlines the administration's strike plans. Those plans would allow faculty to cut finals and would allow university administrators to hire "community experts" to scab on grad students. (See the full memo at www.uomatter.com.)

GTFF Local 3544 is planning a rally Wednesday, Nov. 12, from 11:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. at Johnson Hall on the UO campus.




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