

GEO CONTRACT FAQ

I heard something about GEO contract negotiations... What's going on?

- The GEO has been in negotiations with university administrators over the terms for a new contract since April 2006. The 2004 contract between the GEO and the BoT covered three years and expired on August 15, 2006, so that TA and GA wages at UIUC are now frozen at 2005-2006 levels.
- On December 13, 2006, the UIUC administration rejected the GEO's proposal and requested federal mediation.
- The negotiation process recommenced on January 31, 2007 under the guidance of a professional and impartial mediator, who will work toward bringing both sides to an agreement.

Why have negotiations taken so long? Is mediation really necessary?

- The GEO offered a comprehensive package proposal at the inception of negotiations on April 24, 2006. The administration, however, refused to discuss wages and benefits at that time, and suggested focusing on the GEO's non-financial proposals. Nonetheless, administrators gave little ground on these issues. For example, they refused the GEO's request for the mandatory distribution of important safety information during TA orientation sessions.
- Not until November 3, 2006, after the previous contract had expired, did the administration make a counter-proposal that included wages and benefits. They slightly increased that offer on November 14. The GEO rejected the November 14 offer during a general membership meeting but returned to the table on December 13 with a significantly more modest proposal than previously offered. The administration's outright rejection of that proposal, without a counter offer, impelled GEO negotiators to accept the offer of federal mediation.

What are the current GEO and administration proposals?

- The GEO's proposal of 12/13/06 includes a 4.5 percent per year increase in stipends, full health coverage for all TAs and GAs, and 50 percent coverage for their dependents.
- The administration's best offer (11/14/06) includes a 3% per year increase to the minimum stipend, a 2.5% increase for all others (2.6% average across the bargaining unit), a \$30 increase of their contribution toward employee health care premiums, and no coverage for dependents. The administration proposal does not include back-pay for the months, beginning August 16, that GEO members have worked without a contract.
- Throughout the first day of mediated negotiations, the GEO made a concerted effort to show a willingness for compromise and believes that reciprocation on the part of the administration will allow for a mutually acceptable contract with minimal deliberations.

What's a fair offer? Why does the GEO keep talking about a "living wage"?

- GEO members understand that pursuing a higher degree requires sacrifice and they don't expect luxury. They do, however, believe that any University funding commitment at the 50% appointment level should cover a realistic estimate of the cost of living and studying in Champaign-Urbana, including room, board, tuition, fees, books, supplies, and basic travel expenses. This is what the GEO refers to as a living wage in reference to graduate employees.
- The University administration suggests that an appropriate living wage for the 2006 - 2007 academic year is \$13,572. (www.oar.uiuc.edu—grad_expenses.html) The current minimum stipend is \$12,220. It would require a 11.1% raise to bring the minimum stipend in line with the administration's estimate of \$13,572.
- The administration's estimate, however, includes neither health care nor student fees, which total \$1,432 for an incoming student (\$620 in unwaived academic fees, \$312 in health fees, and \$500 as an Academic Facilities Maintenance Fund Assessment [AFMFA]). A more accurate living wage estimate is therefore \$13,572 + \$1,432 = \$15,004 and would require a 22.8% increase. GEO members paying for dependent health care or international travel expenses would require an even greater raise.

Isn't the administration's offer a good start, at least, toward closing the living wage gap?

- For their own strategic budgeting purposes, university administrators have projected a 3% annual increase in the consumer price index (CPI), a prime indicator of inflation. (*UIUC Strategic Plan 2006 p71* www.uillinois.edu—UIUC STRATEGIC PLAN February 13 2006.pdf) According to the administration's estimates, a three percent annual wage increase moves the base level stipend no closer to a living wage, but merely corrects for inflation.
- The administration's proposal does nothing to cap fees, which means that fee increases in upcoming years can cancel out wage and benefit gains.
- The GEO's proposal of 4.0% corrects for inflation and takes a modest but positive step toward closing the living wage gap.

But isn't the University's budget already tight? Why do TAs deserve more?

- All workers deserve a living wage. At UIUC roughly a third of undergraduate sections are taught by graduate assistants. GEO members play a vital role in fulfilling the University's principal mission of providing the highest quality education to its students.
- The GEO is bargaining over no more than a few million dollars. UIUC's operating expenses for 2005-2006 were \$1.38 billion. In the same year, 130,888 separate gifts to the university totalled \$151.1 million. (www.uillinois.edu—PocketFacts06.pdf)
- The UIUC budget hasn't been tight enough to prevent the University President's salary, now worth \$450,000 and received by Joseph White, from rising 46% since 2000, an average of 6.6% each year. Chancellor Richard Herman's salary of \$350,000 has increased 41%, or 5.9% yearly in the same span. Deputy University Counsel Steven Veazie, the administration's lead negotiator for the GEO contract, has seen his \$177,225 salary increase 33%, or 4.7% a year, since 2000.

Is a living wage really that important?

- Many graduate employees take out student loans to get by, which places them at a disadvantage upon graduation and contributes to rising levels of personal debt that only exacerbate wealth inequality. Graduate students with spouses and children are often forced to enroll their families in the Illinois Medicaid program when they cannot afford the University plan.
- Failure to offer a living wage means that prospective students who aren't eligible for loans or who don't have anything or anyone to fall back on will avoid applying for a graduate education. Limiting opportunities in this way undermines the university's mission to address critical societal needs.
- UIUC loses some of the best and brightest students to rival peer institutions, like the University of California at Berkeley (UC Berkeley), the University of Michigan (UM), Michigan State University (MSU), and the University of Wisconsin at Madison (UW), that offer better wage and benefit packages. (Current minimum monthly stipends: UIUC \$1358 / UC Berkeley \$1,561 - 1,863 / UM \$1640 / UW Madison \$1401 - 1,682; UM and MSU pay up to 95 percent of premium costs for TAs; MSU pays up to 70 percent of premium costs for family care.) This negatively impacts the UIUC's reputation and ability to attract top-notch faculty, media attention, alumni donations, research funding, and investment.

OK, so how can I get involved?

- You can express your commitment to the GEO by:
 - staying informed about contract negotiations and other issues
 - participating in collective actions and rallies
 - conversing with others in the UIUC community about the importance of graduate labor
- If you are a graduate employee, you might also choose to:
 - sign a GEO membership card
 - attend general membership meetings and vote
 - express your opinion by responding to GEO surveys
 - contact your department steward (or become one yourself) and help to organize your department
 - become a member of a GEO committee or just pitch in with planning, organizing, publicity, or any other GEO activity

CLOSE THE LIVING WAGE GAP

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