

Dear Faculty,

This email is an attempt to respond to some of the disturbing inaccuracies and misrepresentations contained in Dean McDonald's email circulated to LS&A faculty yesterday.

GEO are currently still in negotiations with the University. GSI contracts expired on March 1st and have since been extended twice, first until March 17th and subsequently until March 24th in order that we may continue bargaining in good faith with the university. We have scheduled additional bargaining sessions in order to avert a work stoppage. At the University's request, we agreed to meet four out of five days this week and for the first two of these days the University arrived at the table with no prepared counter proposals at all (not even the refusals we've become accustomed to, in the form of 'current contract language'). We do not take this process lightly and the insinuation contained in Dean McDonald's email, based on hearsay, that GEO is planning to engage in an open-ended strike and withhold the grades of undergraduates is trading in rumor, not information. Much of the information contained in the Dean's email and the letter written by the Vice-Provost and circulated by Dean MacDonald has been handpicked to convey the impression that the proposals put forward by GEO are unreasonable. It is also clear that both the letter and the email were written by individuals not at the bargaining table, and likely far removed from the process. This past week, GEO presented its platform to several of the University's regents (who are keenly aware of the University's financial position), all of whom expressed strong support for our proposals. It is important to remember that we have not come up with a random and whimsical set of demands. We have worked to develop a reasonable set of proposals based on a long history of union work in the state and GEO has the support of thirty local unions, as well as our parent union, AFT Michigan.

It is our position that meeting our requests is not a question of resources as Dean McDonald framed it, but a matter of university priorities. GSI salaries currently make up only 1.78% of the University's \$3 billion annual operating budget. GSIs at the University of Michigan do not earn what the university itself, on its financial aid website, sets out as the amount required to attend school here. At *\*no stage\** has GEO asked for a 21.5% increase in compensation. This is simply untrue. Our proposed salary increase of a total of \$781 plus a cost of living adjustment for a 0.5 GSI would meet the University's own financial aid estimate for the cost of attendance for a single graduate student at this university and would only take up a further 0.08% of the annual operating budget. In comparison to the *\*\$226 million\** being spent on stadium renovations (which are surprisingly uninhibited by the supposed financial constraints suffered by the university at present), this is a mere drop in the proverbial bucket.

Our average salary raise of 2.5% for the past 3 contract cycles (9 years) has not kept pace with inflation, and the current raise proposed by the university barely meets current inflationary measures. Surely we can agree that it is unfair to compare a raise, offered in percentage form on the amounts that GSIs earn, to the percentage increases that faculty receive? University of Michigan GSIs are the third highest paid in the country because we have one of the oldest graduate student employee unions that, despite startlingly similar arguments about 'fiscal discipline' from the University in every negotiation over the last 30 years, has fought relentlessly through work stoppages (such as the one you are being exhorted by the Dean not to support) for the raises we have achieved. It is the results of work actions, not the 'generosity' of the

university that have kept our salaries competitive and the University attractive to potential students.

It is notable that both the Dean's email and the letter omit mention of the proposals besides compensation that are forcing a work stoppage. Most prominent among these are low fraction issues, which despite affecting a minority of our membership, have been taken up by all of our members as a focus of this bargaining campaign. These include wage parity for low fraction employees who in addition to receiving lower hourly wages are required to pay for health care and tuition. Establishing wage parity would cost the university a mere \$40–60 000 (depending on the number of GSIs employed at lower fractions), and it would establish a principle of equity which we regard as an important issue of social justice. Extending healthcare to lower fractions also costs less than the more than half a million dollar bonus paid to Robert Kelch the CEO of the University's HMO last year.

GEO and the workers it represents are not acting frivolously or irresponsibly. A work stoppage is not based on a single issue or narrow set of issues. Reducing the complexity and considered nature of our proposals to a "spring fling" is insulting. We are concerned for those amongst our membership who hold multiple jobs in addition to their teaching work in order to pay for healthcare and tuition that the university does not waive. We are concerned about international student GSIs who make up almost a third of our bargaining unit. Many of these GSIs pay taxes at the highest rate (making our take-home pay almost \$3000 less than the \$15 199 figure offered as the current salary of a 0.5 GSI) and are prohibited by law from working additional jobs to supplement their living expenses. We are concerned about our members with disabilities, those with chronic illnesses and those who have children and cannot afford childcare.

The proposed two-day work stoppage does not disregard undergraduate instruction. It is an assertion that GSIs are integral to the quality of undergraduate teaching. We ask for your support because we believe that GSIs who have access to adequate health care and are fairly remunerated in keeping with what the University itself claims as the cost of living are better teachers and scholars. We are aware that many faculty appreciate the link between the labor of their GSIs and the faculty's ability to pursue their own professional development. Simply put, the ideal of labor solidarity being pursued in our request is not abstract or unreasonable. It is an attempt to demonstrate the systematic nature of our work by asking that those whose activities are linked in any way to the work of GSIs desist from crossing our picket lines. We hope that the labor solidarity we seek is not undercut by the University's concerted attempts at misrepresenting our position. It is in the spirit of honesty, transparency and good faith that we hope to earn and keep the support of faculty and undergraduates who are concerned about issues of labor and social justice.

Sincerely,  
Nafisa Essop-Sheik  
GEO Member