Dear University of Michigan Ann Arbor Graduate Students:

As you most likely already know, the Graduate Employees’ Organization (GEO) intends to strike starting tomorrow, Tuesday, September 8, 2020. We learned only today that the Union will strike tomorrow. I write now, to explain some of the issues we have been discussing with GEO, to affirm the importance of graduate student perspectives and student activism at the University of Michigan but also to inform you that if you are a GSI or GSSA, it is the University’s hope and expectation that you will continue to perform the important work that you do to serve our undergraduate students, other graduate students and the rest of the University. Although graduate students who are members of GEO may have voted to strike, individual graduate students are not obligated or required to strike. We expect all employees, including our graduate instructors, to fulfill their employment obligations fully and faithfully and are asking you not to engage in this work stoppage. There are other ways to engage with university leadership, and to have a voice.

Some of you may not be aware that a strike would be illegal. Under Michigan law, public employees, including graduate student employees, may not strike. In addition, GEO’s recently signed contract (April 2020), which covers all GSIs and GSSAs, also prohibits them and the Union from interfering with the University’s operations, including through a strike. Both Michigan law and the collective bargaining agreement stipulate that the way for GEO to affect change on the important issues it has raised in the past several weeks, must be through discussions with the University (e.g. bargaining) on employment-related issues and not by withholding services.

The law also stipulates that this bargaining can take place only on issues related to the employment of GSIs, not on issues related to your status as a student or issues relevant to the broader University community. GEO’s strike is based on a number of issues, many of which are not related to the wages, hours, and working conditions of GSIs and GSSAs. However, as noted below, we understand that these issues are extremely important to many in our community; I certainly affirm the rights of graduate students to voice their perspectives and concerns, and note that there are a range of ways to do so.

Nonetheless, the University’s representatives and GEO’s representatives have been working diligently since June, including all weekend, to address the concerns GEO has raised and to avert the potential illegal strike. In particular, GEO’s representatives have met multiple times with representatives from my office, Academic Human Resources, Rackham Dean Mike Solomon, the International Center leadership, and our public health experts. We believe progress has been made on key issues, including those that do relate to employment concerns. Unfortunately, and despite our efforts, GEO has expressed its intention to strike tomorrow.

The University also continues its work on a number of important issues that concern the overall graduate student experience. We recognize the challenges many graduate students are facing that may have impeded their academic progress. Rackham Graduate School has been evaluating the time-to-degree policy for doctoral students, in light of Covid-19 impacts. This topic will be addressed in the upcoming September 14 State of the Graduate School event. We have also been very concerned about the additional visa, travel and other difficulties many of our international
students are confronting. Our International Center is focused on efforts to expand its operations, including adding staff as their needs dictate, in order to address the needs of our international students.

And, of course, our public health experts are working nearly around-the-clock to ensure we take necessary and prudent steps throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. We announced this past week a surveillance testing program to help us detect and contain spread of COVID-19. We recognize that there is a range of views on each of these issues, and are expanding opportunities for engagement and to share information across campus. These are complex issues that require thoughtful deliberations, much analysis, and cannot be solved shortsightedly.

Let me briefly address two specific issues raised by GEO during impact negotiations - the universal right to work remotely without documentation and the availability of the child care subsidy without regard to the licensed status of the provider. The University feels it has addressed both of these issues. First, we are not aware of any graduate student who is being required to teach in person against their expressed preference. Faculty and GSIs have been treated identically under the guidance put forth by my office. Second, the University recognizes that due to the pandemic there are increased child care needs and is providing support through the CARES funding for Emergency Financial Aid Grants to students (https://obp.umich.edu/mandatory-reporting/cares-act-reporting/) and through dedicated Rackham Financial Aid for child care, including unlicensed facilities. These funds are available to all students facing challenges during the pandemic and supplement the child care subsidy for licensed facilities available through the Office of Financial Aid.

I end by reaffirming my commitment to working collaboratively to create and maintain a university environment in which graduate students - and all members of our community - can thrive. This certainly includes building on our efforts to combat racism, as an essential priority for our university, and to provide an education rooted in the principles of diversity, equity and inclusion.

I hope you will join me in reaffirming your commitment to the UM mission to deliver a world-class education, safely and effectively.

Best,

Susan M. Collins
Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs