

New York City: Columbia graduate students go on strike

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Some 1,900 teaching and research assistants at Columbia University in New York City have been on strike since April 19 demanding union recognition. Members of the Graduate Student Employees Union (GSEU), which represents teaching assistants (TAs) and research assistants (RAs), had voted for the action by an 80 percent margin.

The TAs and RAs have increasingly become the mainstay of the teaching workforce at major US universities, teaching on average 40 percent of undergraduate class hours as well as conducting and supervising research work.

At Columbia, TAs and RAs teach a majority of “Core Curriculum” classes, write grants, carry out experiments, grade papers, lead labs, and teach discussion sections in half of the humanities courses and two-thirds of natural sciences courses. Despite the fact that they get paid to do much of the work that makes Columbia an educational and research institution—or more precisely, because of this fact—the university does not want to recognize them as employees with a right to bargain collectively.

It has been three years since the union filed for an election with the federal National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) in March 2001. Columbia immediately hired a union-busting law firm to mire the union in legal wrangling at the NLRB before the vote could take place. After stalling for a year, the NLRB finally allowed the assistants to vote. But following the March 2002 vote, Columbia appealed to the NLRB again, preventing the ballots from being counted. In the three years that Columbia has refused to negotiate, most of the students present during the original organizing drive have graduated or left.

Stephen Twilley, a second year graduate student in Italian, described to the WSWS the situation confronting the striking TAs and RAs:

“This goes way beyond stipends. When we choose a university for our graduate studies, we are committed for five, six or seven years. If we haven’t got health care, vision care, dental care, or childcare we have to worry about a lot of things other than our teaching. It’s not good for us, and it’s not good for the undergrads either, because we aren’t

able to focus the kind of attention on them that we would like.”

He pointed out that Columbia could use its purchasing power to obtain such benefits relatively cheaply, while most graduate students cannot afford to obtain them on their own.

The Columbia administration has set a current minimum stipend level of \$16,000. Twilley said that the decision to set a minimum came in response to the union organizing effort.

Twilley further explained that the graduate students have become a source of cheap labor for Columbia. “Graduate students teach 60 percent of the core courses. Columbia brings in a few star professors and charges a high tuition, but we’re the ones who run things. They are just trying to get things done at the lowest possible cost.”

In addition, the lack of grievance procedures at the university leaves TAs and RAs at the mercy of their superiors, who can cut their positions as well as their grades.

Throughout the US higher education system, there is a move to a part-time and contingent teaching staff in order to cut costs. According to a study done by the American Association for University Professors (AAUP), between 1989 and 2001, the percentage of part-time faculty rose from 17.4 to 20.6 percent at public four-year institutions, while at private colleges, the rate increased from 33.3 to 40.7 percent.

Universities often argue that increased stipends and benefits for teaching and research assistants will force increased tuition. This year’s tuition at Columbia jumped 5.8 percent to \$26,340—the largest hike in the past seven years.

According to the AAUP, this past year tuition and fees around the country rose by an average of 6.0 percent at private four-year colleges and universities and by 14.1 percent during the same period at public two- and four-year institutions. At the same time, however, the average faculty salaries at private four-year institutions rose by only 3 percent, and average faculty salaries at most public two- and four-year institutions rose by less than 2 percent. At Rutgers University in New Jersey, for instance, professors and graduates received no raise, yet tuition rose by 9 percent.

The other factors that lead to tuition hikes, according to the AAUP, “include the escalating costs of benefits for all employees, reductions in state support of public institutions, growing institutional financial-aid costs, expansion of the science and research infrastructure at research universities, and the increasing costs of information technology.” Public universities also spend enormous sums on sports facilities and administrative bureaucracies.

Aside from the increasing reliance on part-time labor, universities have been undermining the tenure system. Professors traditionally try to find tenured positions at universities. The tenure system not only ensures job security but also maintains academic freedom and permits scholars to conduct research in areas that have human rather than profit interest.

The gradual abolition of the tenure system and its replacement with contingent labor threatens salaries and living standards, but it also subordinates research to the profit motive of the institutions. Those professors doing research in areas that bring in grants from corporations, publishers, the government, and private institutions will be much more likely to receive tenure.

At public universities, where labor laws are determined by the states, TAs and RAs first began organizing in 1969. Only in the fall of 2000 did the NLRB recognize the status of graduate students at private universities as workers, spurring organizing drives at a number of universities.

In response, these ostensibly liberal academic institutions have mounted corporate-style anti-union campaigns, often to the detriment of the educational and research environment.

In its anti-union campaign, Columbia has used the pretext that union recognition would interfere with the relationship between graduate students and their professors. Although the 1,900 graduate students do a considerable amount of the university’s work, it claims they are not employees but only students whose labor is simply a part of their training. However, in his former post as president of the University of Michigan, Columbia’s president, Lee Bollinger, said he welcomed the union of TAs and RAs and admitted it did not hurt their relationships with their professors.

The refusal of the university to recognize the graduate students’ union could result in thousands of undergraduates losing the investment of time, energy, thought and large tuition payments they put into their classes. They may receive grades, but no one will be able to read their essays or grade their tests.

Laboratory experiments and other research that requires the work of RAs will likely be interrupted at great cost as well.

As economic conditions worsen and state governments balance their budgets by cutting funding to universities,

strikes and threats of strikes by faculty and employed students have taken place at a number of major universities. These include:

* The University of Michigan Lecturers’ Employee Organization (LEO) staged a one-day walkout on Thursday, April 8. It is in the process of negotiating its first contract.

* Yale University: In March of 2003, a thousand TAs and RAs in the Graduate Employees and Students Organization joined in a week-long strike along with three other unions representing a total of more than 5,000 workers. This was Yale’s eighth strike in 35 years and involved more workers than ever before.

* University of Wisconsin: Teaching assistants walked out for a two-day strike on April 27, which is set to be followed by a “grading strike” if a contract agreement is not reached with the State.

* New York University: On April 21, 91 percent of adjunct professors voted to strike at NYU if a bargaining agreement was not reached. An agreement was reached at 6:40 a.m., the morning that the strike was scheduled.

* Rutgers University: Teaching assistants, after working since last June with no contract, voted to strike but the union leadership decided to push it off until next September. The strike could have been made to coincide with the Columbia TA/RA strike.

* University of Pennsylvania: TA union members set a strike vote this month. TAs there are facing an almost identical situation to those at Columbia, where an appeal to the NLRB has been used to indefinitely postpone recognition and enter bargaining.

* University of Hawaii: On March 30 and 31, professors voted to strike over wages. A strike was barely averted when the union agreed to a contract that was grudgingly accepted by the members. Professors had a strike only three years earlier in 2001.

* Pennsylvania State College System: 90 percent of the 5,500 faculty members voted, and 95 percent of those voting supported a strike, according to the union. Despite the overwhelming willingness of the faculty to strike, the union agreed to an unpopular contract and pushed it through. Only 3,300 of the union’s 5,500 members even voted on the contract, and of these about 30 percent opposed it.



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