

Graduate students strike at Columbia and Yale universities

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Graduate student-employees coordinated a five-day strike at both Columbia University in New York City and Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut last week in order to publicize their demand that the two US Ivy League schools recognize their right to unionize. There were widely different evaluations of the walkout's impact, depending on which side provided the estimate. According to a Yale union representative, more than one half of the 700 teaching assistants walked out, affecting more than 450 classes.

The presidents of both universities continue to refuse to recognize the graduate students as employees. They maintain that as students, they have no right to negotiate a contract. As part of the cost-cutting within the American university system, there is an increasing use of graduate students to replace full-time professors. These students often have to work as much as 30 hours a week as teaching and research assistants.

At Columbia, the more than 1,000 student-employees are seeking union recognition as part of United Auto Workers Local 2100. At Yale, more than 500 teaching assistants are seeking recognition as an affiliate of UNITE HERE, a union of textile, hotel and restaurant workers. Columbia graduate students make only \$18,000 a year and complain of an inferior healthcare plan. The striking students at Columbia point out that the institution has an endowment of \$4.5 billion and is one of the largest landowners in New York City. Also, the university's President Lee Bollinger receives an annual salary of over \$650,000 per year.

Columbia students engaged in a strike in April of last year in a failed attempt to win union recognition (See "Columbia graduate students go on strike"). On March 2003, a thousand graduate students at Yale engaged in a one week strike for union recognition in collaboration with three other unions at the university (See "Workers

and graduate students end five-day strike at Yale").

An issue of special importance at Columbia is academic freedom. On Tuesday, April 19, students held a rally to defend Professor Joseph Massad, a popular and award-winning member of the university's Middle Eastern and East Asian Languages and Culture (MEALC) department. He has been targeted by right-wing Zionists, who have falsely accused him of intimidating some students. Columbia established a panel to investigate. It concluded that the charges were credible despite the fact that it was not able to produce evidence that substantiated this conclusion. Quite the contrary, the panel admitted that Professor Massad was quite open with allowing students to express their various points of view. He has strenuously denied the allegations of intimidation, but was never allowed to cross-examine his accusers. The panel nevertheless arrived at the conclusion that objectively serves the purpose of suppressing opposition to Israeli aggression and defense Palestinian rights (See "New York Times joins witch-hunt of Columbia University professors").

A number of the professors, graduate students and undergraduate students who spoke at the Tuesday rally made the point that the issuance of the report has had a chilling effect on academic freedom at the university. Nevertheless, this issue was totally dropped when John Sweeney, president of the AFL-CIO, spoke at a rally of several thousand in front of Columbia on April 20, and when Democratic Party politician and former presidential candidate Jesse Jackson spoke at a rally on April 21 at New York University (NYU) for graduate students there who are seeking a new contract. Although Jackson glibly talked of bringing back democracy to the American people, he said nothing about the attack on Professor Massad, and academic freedom.

At the Columbia rally on April 19, a couple of hundred students held signs calling for job security and academic freedom. A number of graduate students spoke to the WWSWS at the rally to express their reasons for participating in the one-week strike. Etay Ziv is a research assistant in the bio-medical MD, PhD. program. He said, "Columbia's healthcare benefits are worthless if you are starting a family. My wife is pregnant, and we do not have the money to pay all the expenses involved. We will have to pay \$2,000 out of our own pockets. I think we would be better off with our own private healthcare plan. Due to the fact that I have a government grant, I have one of the better salaries, and nevertheless I pay 60 percent of my money on housing and 30 percent on healthcare. There is not money enough left to survive on."

Laura Weinstein, in the PhD. program in the Arts, said, "I am not now teaching, but when I do I would like to have academic freedom. I would like not to have to censor myself. We need a union to defend academic freedom. I enjoy what I am doing, but I have serious complaints especially about the health insurance. People like me who are involved in this kind of work are always in serious financial straits."

Ellen Ketels is in the PhD. program in English and works as a teaching assistant in the university's writing program. She explained that teaching assistants like herself do much of the teaching of freshmen and sophomores in Columbia's core courses. "There are 80 teaching assistants in this writing program under the guidance of two full professors who oversee our work," she said. "I get paid \$18,000 before taxes, healthcare expenses, and rent. I am even thinking of moving out of Manhattan to Brooklyn or Queens, where the rents are cheaper. Columbia's health insurance benefits are crappy. You have a choice of the different levels of benefits that you want to pay for. The more you pay, the less crappy are the benefits.... I am a strong believer in academic freedom. If they can conduct an attack like this on one professor who is to say who will be next?"

Thousands rallied on April 20 in front of Columbia University, including about 250 strikers from Yale. Melissa Stuckey, a Yale graduate student-employee in her fifth year said, "Job security and academic freedom are connected. We want to both pay our bills and teach. I will earn even less next year. I am struggling right now to finish my PhD. The policy of this

administration should be entitled, 'leave all teachers behind.'" Although 16 Yale Sociology professors wrote a letter to the university's president Richard Levin in support of the striking students, many professors are reportedly reluctant to openly express sympathy for fear of retribution.

The New York State's Attorney General and Connecticut's Secretary of State have certified that the majority of the graduate students at both universities have signed cards in favor of union representation, but the administrations at both schools have refused to recognize a union. The administrators can legally do this because in July 2004, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) ruled that a private university is not required to recognize the right of graduate students to collectively bargain. This reversed an earlier NLRB ruling that required them to recognize graduate students as employees and to negotiate if they formed a union. Currently, only public universities can be forced to recognize graduate student unions, because of the somewhat different labor laws regulating such institutions.

This latest NLRB ruling is of particular concern to the NYU graduate student-employees, who three years ago were the first to force a private university to recognize and negotiate with them as a union. The NYU administration has refused to negotiate a new contract with the approximately 1,200 graduate students who work on the campus. Graduate students rallied on Thursday, April 21 outside the offices of university president John Sexton to press their demand for a contract to replace the one that expires in August of this year. Also on Thursday, hundreds of people staged a rally at the University of Massachusetts that was organized by the graduate student union, which is protesting the university's demand for cuts in graduate student-employees' real wages and their health and childcare benefits.



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