

Over 1,000 demonstrate for New York University graduate student employees

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Over a thousand graduate students and their supporters held a noontime rally August 31 in front of New York University's Bobst Library, demanding that school administrators end their refusal to negotiate a new contract with its graduate student employees union. The contract between the university and some 1,000 graduate students represented by the United Auto Workers (UAW) expired on the day of the demonstration.

Participating in the rally were delegations of graduate students from Yale and Columbia universities, as well as from many other unions, including hotel workers, the Professional Staff Congress, and the American Federation of Teachers. The demonstrators held signs reading "Contract Now" and "Just Say No to Company Unions."

In an act that was prearranged with the authorities, about 80 demonstrators, including AFL-CIO President John Sweeney, sat in front of the library for a few minutes, and then cooperated with the police, who placed them in plastic handcuffs and removed them from the area. Police officials reported that all of those arrested were soon released.

Graduate students throughout the country have been struggling to establish unions because they have to work as much as 30 hours a week as teaching and research assistants for minimal pay and benefits. American universities are making use of graduate students as cheap labor in order to replace full-time professors.

Mathew Vitz, a third-year NYU graduate student in history, told the WSWS: "NYU is refusing to negotiate with us because they have a pro-Republican National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) ruling that says that we are not workers, but only students. However, this is not true. We are both students and workers. NYU is

claiming that even without a contract we would get the same wages and benefits, but without a negotiated contract this is absolutely not guaranteed. I know that the co-pays for health benefits are going up something like 40 to 50 percent.

"The government is obviously on their side. In addition, the media is not behind us. The unions just don't seem to have the same power as they used to. We have a big struggle on our hands."

Sarah Haley, a third-year graduate student in African-American studies at Yale, came to the rally with a busload of other graduate student workers from that university. She told the WSWS, "We are here in solidarity with NYU's teaching assistants. We are part of the same national struggle of all graduate employees. NYU's graduate union was the first private university grad student union to be recognized. We had a one-week strike with Columbia students earlier this year and this rally is part of our campaign as well.

"We need to recruit into our union new graduate students every year as a result of the continuous turnover. At Yale, we are paid less each succeeding year, as they take advantage of the fact that we are totally committed to earning our doctoral degrees. We have no subsidized health care or child care. The fees are exorbitant. I am concerned that there is only one black woman tenured at Yale. I am fighting for the futures of people like me—women and people of color—and against the closing of opportunities. They hire more temporary adjuncts instead of permanent, tenured staff. They are creating a contingent workforce. Yes, Yale is doing to its professors what has been happening generally to labor."

Bill Boyer, a third-year NYU graduate student in music, said, "We are here to let people know that we are disenfranchised by the university. We are asking

that they treat us fairly as employees. They are pretending to act ‘in good faith’ by promising, without guarantees, that they will continue to give a thousand dollars additional as under the old contract. But that is only to try to keep the peace with the present graduate student employees.”

In a statement defending its refusal to negotiate a new contract, the university claimed that the graduate union had improperly interfered with the university’s decision-making, citing the fact that the union filed grievances over the assignment of teachers to classes. The university also claimed that the union had turned down an offer it made earlier in August. In response, the union has issued a press release explaining that NYU’s offer was merely its attempt to unilaterally force the workers to accept “a pro-management contract” without allowing union representatives to discuss or even raise questions about the content of the proposal.

NYU’s allegation that the union is interfering with academic freedom is entirely hypocritical. It is worth noting that during the Columbia-Yale university graduate student strike last April, it was the graduate students at Columbia who rallied to defend the academic freedom of Professor Joseph Massad of the university’s Middle Eastern and East Asian Languages and Culture Department. Because of his political views, this professor’s right to teach has come under attack by right-wing Zionist students and the university administration.

Michael Palm, an NYU PhD candidate in American studies who is the union chair, charged that NYU has raised the issue of academic freedom as a diversion. Palm said that the real grievances that have upset the university are those involving economic issues, such as the university’s practice of reclassifying graduate students so that the administration can pay them less.

He also explained that the graduate student assistants, rather than being in conflict with the teachers, have obtained hundreds of signatures from faculty members supporting the union. Indeed, a letter circulated by some of the professors has stated that they are unaware of any grievance that has impeded academic freedom or their ability to teach.

It is widely recognized that the real reason NYU refuses to negotiate with the union is because it simply is no longer legally obligated to do so. This change

took place when the National Labor Relations Board issued a decision last July that graduate students cannot legally be considered employees. The NLRB made this ruling when the graduate student workers from Brown University petitioned the board to win the same union status as existed at NYU.

That decision reversed a 2000 ruling that had concluded that graduate students engaged in teaching and research were legally workers and did have the right to form a union. Indeed, it was the 2000 ruling that compelled NYU in March 2001 to recognize the UAW local formed by graduate students.

When the NLRB reversed itself, it left NYU as the only private university that had a contract with a graduate student union. Public universities, which do not come under the NLRB, are still compelled to recognize unions formed by their graduate student employees.



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