

New York University graduate student-workers on strike

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Some 1,000 graduate student-workers, members of Local 2110 of the United Auto Workers, went on strike Wednesday, November 9, over New York University's refusal to recognize their union and negotiate a new contract. About 600 strikers and supporters set up a picket line in front of NYU's main library, shouting, "What do we want? Contract. When do we want it? Now!" The supporters included graduate student-employees from other schools, members of other unions, as well as NYU professors and undergraduate students.

A group of professors met with NYU President John Sexton last Tuesday in a failed attempt to convince him to negotiate with the union. In addition, the union has reported that more than 500 faculty members have pledged to teach their classes off campus as an act of solidarity with the strike.

The last contract expired August 31. On August 2, the university administration unilaterally offered the graduate student-employees a \$1,000-a-year increase in their \$19,000 per year stipend over the next three years. However, the offer did not include a grievance procedure nor did it include the obligatory union membership by all graduate-student employees. When the union did not accept the offer, the university refused to negotiate a new contract.

NYU has claimed that the major issue of contention between the two sides is not economic, but rather that of academic freedom. The administration claims that its refusal to recognize the union and negotiate a grievance procedure stems from its concern that such a protocol would interfere with the university's right to run the school as it sees fit.

However, student assistants throughout the country have complained that while the universities benefited economically from their increasing workloads as

teaching and research assistants, they have very little rights or voice in the academic work in which they are engaged.

As far as academic freedom, the graduate student-workers have shown far greater concern than the administration. During a one-week strike last April, the Columbia University graduate student-employees defended Professor Joseph Massad of the school's Middle Eastern and East Asian languages and Culture Department against the attacks by right-wing Zionist students and the university administration on his right to determine the content of his classes.

In any event, it is widely recognized that the real reason NYU will not negotiate with the workers is simply that the school is no longer legally obligated to do so. This is a result of a 2004 National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) decision that private university graduate student assistants are not workers, which reversed a 2000 NLRB ruling that had found that student-employees legally are workers.

It was under this earlier ruling that NYU was compelled to become the only private university to recognize and negotiate a contract with the school's Graduate Students Organizing Committee, which has since become a UAW local. However, as the union points out, there is nothing that legally prevents the university from recognizing the graduate student employees and negotiating a new contract. Other labor laws cover graduate assistants at the public universities who have been in legally recognized unions for decades.

The contract won by the NYU graduate student-employees in 2002 provided for job security, increased salaries by an average of 40 percent, established health care and other benefits, and also provided for a grievance procedure. The union reports that since the

strike began, the university has cut its members' health benefits.

Scott, a teaching assistant in French, discussed some of these issues with the WSWS.

“President Sexton has refused to negotiate with us. The contract he offered would take away a lot of union powers. Two hundred and thirty faculty members have sent him a letter urging him to settle, but this effort came to no avail. As a result, 85 percent of us voted to strike.

“As a result of the old contract, our wages went from \$13,000 to \$19,000 per year with health and other benefits, like childcare. The administration has offered us an increase of \$1,000 per year, but there is no guarantee that they will not take it away from us.

“More than that, we need union representation, we need a voice. We write tests, plan lessons, write the syllabus, grade papers on top of the course load that we have. We do not have the time or the expertise to deal with grievances.

“For example, job security is an issue. The university might want to give some of these responsibilities to someone else other than a teaching assistant, like an adjunct or a graduate student, for less money. They can also violate seniority rights by giving a job to a less senior assistant.

“It is not true that we want to interfere with academic freedom. The issues here are economic, not political. NYU claims that with tuition they are really giving us \$50,000 per year. However, what they deliberately leave out is that as you advance, you have less and less of a course load. After four years, I have to take no courses at all. Therefore the school does not contribute anything to the cost of my tuition. The fact of the matter is that we are not paid very well.

“There is not a lot of money in the humanities. I do this because I love the field that I am in, and I love teaching students. Our working environment is the students' learning environment.”



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