

# Columbia University refuses to recognize graduate student union

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On January 30, Columbia University in New York City announced it would not recognize the Graduate Workers of Columbia-United Auto Workers (GWC-UAW) Local 2110 as the bargaining agent for student workers on campus.

Columbia's announcement is a response by the recent ruling by the regional National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), which accepted the result of a 2016 vote by graduate students to join the UAW. The university has challenged the results of the certification vote—which was 1,602 to 623 in favor—and has steadfastly refused to recognize the right of student workers to organize.

Columbia Provost John Coatsworth acknowledged in an open letter that the administration's decision would create “disappointment and dispute” but made it clear the university would not back down. “While the National Labor Relations Board's position on student assistants has shifted repeatedly with changes in political administrations, the University's view has remained constant.”

In 2015, the NLRB twice rejected petitions by graduate students to form a union, but the following year it overturned the ruling. University administrators have indicated they will ask a federal appellate court to review the dispute. In the meantime, however, administrators no doubt hope the NLRB will reverse its decision once the Trump administration appoints a fifth member to the board.

Responding to the decision, the GWC-UAW bargaining committee said, “While it is deeply disappointing to continue putting legal hurdles in the way of justice, their action merely underscores the need to continue building majority support until they finally respect our choice and start bargaining.” On February 1, the union organized a protest of a few hundred Columbia students, as well as students from nearby

universities and medical assistants from the Columbia University Medical Center, on the university's main campus.

Graduate students are highly exploited. According to glassdoor.com a base salary for a teaching assistant is \$22,686, while the university estimates that the cost of tuition and living expenses for a master's student in 2017-2018 is \$79,890. In addition to trying to get by on these poverty wages, in one of the most expensive metropolitan areas in the world, grad students must pay \$1,000 for health insurance premiums.

At the same time, the “non-profit” university is making hundreds of millions of dollars from stock market and real estate and its top administrators are raking in enormous salaries. An *Upper West Side Patch* article titled, “Who Profits From ‘Columbia University Inc.’ On Upper West Side?” notes, “Between July 2014 and June 2015, Columbia University's annual income from its Wall Street investments exceeded \$856 million. In addition, during the same period, Columbia University's annual rental income from its real estate property exceeded \$23 million and its annual income from research ‘royalties’ exceeded \$89 million.”

Much of the university's \$4.9 billion in annual revenues between July 2014 and June 2015 went to provide huge total compensation payments to administrators and professors. These include: Nirmal Narvekar, president of Investment Management (\$7,221,568); Peter Holland, executive vice president of Investment Management (\$6,509,884); David Silvers, clinical professor (\$4,633,927); and Jeffrey Moses, professor of medicine, (\$2,672,693). Provost John Coatsworth “only” received \$756,218, 34 times more than the base salary of a teaching assistant.

Teaching and research assistants have every reason to organize to fight for their rights against the university

administration and the powerful financial and political forces that stand behind it. However, it is fatally naïve to believe that the UAW is, as the GWC-UAW web site claims, “one of the strongest unions in the country,” which will bring decades of organizing and bargaining experience and expertise to our campaign.”

On the contrary, the UAW is deeply hated by hundreds of thousands of autoworkers and other workers who have suffered decades of mass layoffs, wage and benefit concessions and worsening working conditions at the hands of the UAW. As recent federal indictments have revealed, the “bargaining expertise” of the UAW was manifested through the more than \$1.5 million in bribes to UAW negotiators from Fiat Chrysler.

The UAW long ago abandoned any association with the class struggle and since the 1980s has been based on labor-management “partnership.” In the name of making the corporations more competitive and profitable the UAW suppressed strikes and helped transform autoworkers, once the highest paid industrial workers in the US, into a largely cheap labor and temporary workforce. The only interest the UAW apparatus has in “organizing” university workers is to bolster its dues income after its disastrous policies led to a collapse in membership from over 1.5 million in 1979 to 415,000 today.

The nationalist and pro-capitalist program of the UAW has long manifested itself through the political subordination of the working class to the corporate-controlled Democratic Party.

The GWC-UAW has openly sought the support of Democratic Party politicians. In 2016 they hailed the endorsements of New York Mayor Bill de Blasio, Senator Charles Schumer and Hillary Clinton, all of whom are shills of Wall Street. Under the Obama administration 300,000 teaching and school jobs were destroyed while de Blasio has overseen a sharp expansion of for-profit charter schools in New York City.

Students who turned to the UAW at New York University have not overcome their poverty wages and pariah status. In 2005, after NYU refused to negotiate with the GSOC-UAW Local 2110, Democrat Jesse Jackson came in to negotiate only to see talks collapse. TAs and RAs were on strike for six months when the union shut down the walkout without a new contract.

GSOC-UAW was not recognized until 2013 and NYU did not negotiate a contract until 2015. The deal included a paltry wage increase of 2.25 to 2.5 percent from 2015 to 2020 even though the cost of attending the university is estimated to increase 5 percent for the 2017-2018 school year and for every subsequent year.

Grad students need organization. But not organizations like the UAW, the American Federation of Teachers and other unions, which defend capitalism and politically subordinate workers to the Democrats, a party of austerity and war, no less ruthless than Trump and the Republicans.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) urges students to build rank-and-file workplace committees, democratically controlled by university workers themselves, to counterpoise their will to the dictates of the administration. These workplace committees should fight for the broadest mobilization of the working class against the corporate control of universities.



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