

Columbia University teaching assistants launch week-long strike

Daniel de Vries
26 April 2018

Three thousand graduate student workers at Columbia University in New York City went out on strike Tuesday, building on the growing wave of education workers' struggles taking place nationally and internationally this year.

Like their counterparts in West Virginia, Oklahoma and elsewhere, striking teaching and research assistants at the elite private university are battling over low wages and inadequate healthcare coverage, along with other workplace and social issues.

The immediate trigger for the walkout was the Columbia administration's refusal to bargain with the recently certified union, Graduate Workers of Columbia-United Auto Workers (GWC-UAW) Local 2110. The university refuses to recognize student workers as employees, claiming their status as students precludes them from also being employees.

The National Labor Relations Board ruled to the contrary in 2016 in its most recent determination. However, the NLRB has reversed itself repeatedly depending on its political makeup, with Democratic administrations authorizing unionization and Republicans ruling against it. Columbia administrators again this year refused to bargain, emboldened by the Trump administration's likely hostile stance towards unionization.

Columbia University has followed the broader trend within higher education of relying upon highly exploited, part-time labor for a growing share of university work. Average earnings for teaching assistants, under \$23,000 a year, places them below New York City's official poverty threshold for an individual. New York City's metric is more accurate than federal thresholds in that it considers the higher cost of housing and other expenses in New York.

The struggle of part-time workers to maintain a

decent standard of living stands in stark contrast to the wealth of Columbia University and its top administrators. Lee Bollinger, Columbia's president, takes in \$1.4 million a year, a level once unheard-of for a college administrator. Columbia, which holds an endowment of around \$10 billion, is engaged in a multibillion-dollar expansion, which is transforming upper Manhattan and driving up rents far beyond the means of the area's working-class residents.

A large percentage of the graduate student workers at Columbia are international students. Typically prohibited from taking on other jobs, these students are often wholly dependent on the university to stay in the country and have little recourse for unpaid or delayed stipends, a common complaint among student assistants.

Under conditions of a brutal crackdown on immigrants, many international students live in fear of being expelled. Columbia has denied undocumented students access to summer housing, threatening some with homelessness, according to a spokeswoman from the student group UndoCU.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with striking workers and supporters on the picket line and during a rally Wednesday. Amy, a philosophy graduate student and striking worker, explained, "What is happening at Columbia is part of a broader movement that's happening across the country where education labor is exercising its power by going on strike and demanding the labor rights deserved by the workers. I'm on strike as a participant in that broad movement."

"Specifically, at Columbia, what I'm on strike for has to do with two general principles," she said. "One is the fact that the administration is violating the democratic mandate of the graduate workers, who voted by 72 percent to form a union. Another reason

I'm on strike is because I want a contract.

"As a graduate student at Columbia I experience a lot of forms of job insecurity. So, despite the fact that nobody has graduated from my particular program in philosophy within five years for over a couple of decades, we're only given five years of funding. It's basically expected that after your fifth year you have to get external funding. This often becomes very precarious. There are a number of graduate workers who haven't managed to get that funding for the last couple years of the program, so have had to go home or find funding elsewhere."

Ned, a creative writing undergraduate student at Columbia and a work-study student, came out to support striking student-workers. "The university is trying to say they are students and not workers," he said. "As an undergraduate who is taught by graduate workers and who sees what they do, I want to say they are workers. We are here to show we support them and encourage them and hope the university will realize their position as it should be.

"A lot of eyes are on Columbia now because this is going to set a precedent in the national political context in terms of what people want and how they want to get it. It also sets a precedent on how the universities have to act when students decide to strike, want to bargain, and what the repercussions are if they don't."

The GWC-UAW has already pledged to conclude the walkout on April 30, the last day of classes. The Columbia administration is prepared to ride out the week of job action, rescheduling classes to off-campus locations with the blessing of the union, resuming full operations when finals begin next week.

As the struggles of teachers across the country have demonstrated, the role of the unions has been to contain the strivings of workers, isolate individual walkouts and prevent the development of a nationwide struggle to defend education and those that provide it. In New York, the unions are allied with Governor Andrew Cuomo who has waged a vicious attack on teacher tenure rights by imposing a punitive evaluation system to facilitate the firing of teachers in so-called failing schools, thus scapegoating educators for problems caused by decades of school funding cuts and the growth of poverty.

In exchange for the unions' collaboration, Cuomo has just signed a bill that will facilitate efforts by

unions to recruit new members and increase their dues base.

To carry the struggle forward, student workers must take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the unions through the election of rank-and-file committees, and reach out to the millions of workers in the New York City area to defend their struggle.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact