

# Cafeteria workers at the New School threatened with layoffs

Philip Guelpa  
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Most of the current forty-five cafeteria workers at The New School for Social Research, a private university in New York City, will be laid off at the beginning of July, according to the school administration, and replaced by lower paid student workers. Some of the workers may be moved to other facilities run by the private contractor, Chartwells/Compass USA, which currently holds a service contract to operate The New School cafeteria, but they would suffer substantial cuts in seniority, pay, and benefits. Many will simply lose their jobs.

A 54-year-old cafeteria worker, Rodrick Prude, told the *New School Free Press*, “If this goes down, I lose everything, basically. Pension, health insurance. I can’t pay my bills with no job. I would have to start all over again with nothing.” The university has said that existing workers may apply for the new positions, but with no preference or continuation of current pay and benefits.

As part of a nation-wide and, indeed, world-wide campaign by the financial and corporate elite to attack education at every level, the move by the school is clearly aimed at cutting costs by substituting super-exploited student labor for already poorly paid workers.

Stephen Stabile, vice president for finance and business and treasurer, said that the university would run the cafeteria itself, providing an “opportunity for new student jobs.” Though, he noted, “there will likely be some changes in pay.” According to Stabile, food services are not profitable for the university.

Chartwells’ contract with the university, which was initiated in 2002, ends July 1, but its termination has been publicly known since March 5.

The New School cafeteria workers have been abandoned by UNITE HERE Local 100, the union which supposedly represents them. The school has stated that it is under no obligation to bargain with the union, which, for its part, has only engaged in an impotent campaign of leafleting and postering and a belated appeal for student

support.

This is yet another example of the decades-long transformation of unions around the world into organizations hostile to the interests of the working class, whose primary interest is the protection of the privileges of their well-paid officials at whatever cost to their own members. The unions in the United States function as political agents of the corporate-run Democratic Party seeking to tie the working class to the party of Wall Street and war.

The ongoing teachers strikes and protests across the US, with similar movements of students, instructors, and education staff in Europe, Africa, and Latin America clearly demonstrate the intensification of the class struggle in response to the growing crisis of capitalism. These struggles have developed outside of and against the efforts of official unions to stifle them. Yet as tens of thousands of teachers have experienced in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona, the unions will do everything in their power prevent or shut down strikes and to channel the militancy of workers into votes for the Democrats in November.

The planned layoffs at The New School are a brutal attack on these workers, many of whom have worked at the cafeteria for years, in one of the most expensive and socially unequal cities in the world.

The university’s action has been met with strong opposition from students. However, protests against the job losses have been dominated by self-proclaimed Maoists and pseudo-left groups who seek to substitute the dead end of middle class protest politics, centering on the occupation of the school’s cafeteria, for a genuine struggle to rally support from workers and students across the city and beyond based on a clear political program opposed to the treachery of the unions their alliance with the Democratic Party.

The cafeteria occupation, organized by The New School

Communist Student Group (CSG), began on Tuesday, May 1. The group, affiliated with the Maoist Communist Group, has offered no strategy for the workers. Indeed, there has been little involvement by the workers in the occupation. Speakers have mixed demagogic rhetoric about “workers’ power” with slogans that seek to foment reactionary racial politics, such as “Brown Lives Matter,” which, along with the politics of gender and sexual identity, are the substance of official political culture at The New School.

The cafeteria occupation is an adventurist stunt which promotes the idea that the school’s administration can be pressured into changing its policy and frames the struggle as one based on isolated actions and an appeal to identity politics, including claims that the layoffs would not occur if the cafeteria staff were white.

Instead of fighting to unite the working class of all races and nationalities against the increasingly brutal austerity measures of the capitalist elite, the political orientation of the CSG promotes isolation and disorientation among students at The New School, the cafeteria workers and the working class in general.

It is no accident that this action is fomented by a Maoist group, which draws its political inspiration from Chinese-style Stalinism, a tendency virulently opposed to any independent political mobilization of the working class.

The remainder of the pseudo-left in New York played no less of a disgraceful role, making sure that all criticism of the trade unions and the Democratic Party was kept from the ears of the cafeteria workers and workers throughout the city. The Democratic Socialists of America called on its members to support a protest rally for its “Maoist comrades” in front of the New School on May 4.

The school initially refused the occupiers’ demands for negotiations with top-level administrators. The university president, David Van Zandt, who reportedly receives annual compensation of over two million dollars, subsequently visited the protest, but would not agree to provide a written guarantee that all workers would be rehired with their same pay and benefits. Since then, several contradictory statements have been issued regarding whether the workers would be rehired and under what terms.

According to a Facebook posting by one of the occupiers, school administrators stated that they could not negotiate until August (after the expiration of the service contract with Chartwell and all the workers have lost their jobs), and that any workers who were rehired would not

retain their previous status. With the end of the semester only a week away, the university will simply wait out the protest.

Concurrently with the struggle of the cafeteria workers, 852 teaching assistants and similar educational workers at the New School are threatening to strike on May 8 as the spring semester ends, potentially disrupting final exams and other end-of-term activities. A year ago, these workers were organized by the union SENS-UAW (Student Employees at the New School-United Auto Workers), which has been negotiating with the school’s administration since September without resolution.

This long, drawn-out process is an example of a decades-long strategy employed by the UAW and other unions to wear down and demoralize workers. In the case of The New School, the union dragged out the negotiations to the end of the semester so that the workers will be pressured to accept a sell-out contract.

The exploitation of student teaching staff has become a standard feature of higher education in New York and across the country. A similar struggle by graduate student workers took place last month uptown at Columbia University. The strikers at Columbia are also represented by a UAW local but no effort has been made to unite their struggle with the students at the New School.

Teaching assistants must break with any illusions they may have in the UAW, which is responsible for the major betrayal of autoworkers in the last round of contract talks in 2015, pushing through concessions against the will of workers who voted down the contracts at Fiat Chrysler (FCA) and by fraud at Ford. It has since emerged that leading UAW officials took millions of dollars in bribes from FCA to negotiate contracts favorable to the company.

To avoid betrayal, the struggle against layoffs and for decent pay and benefits for student instructors at the New School must be taken out of the hands of the unions. Workers must form independent, rank-and-file committees to fight for a socialist program which will benefit the working class not the tiny super-rich capitalist elite which currently dominates society.



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