

NYC New School worker-students strike against poverty wages

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Some 850 worker-students at the New School for Social Research in New York City went on strike Tuesday to protest the lack of a contract. The strikers, teaching assistants (TAs) and research assistants (RAs), set up picket lines at three entrances to the school, which is located in lower Manhattan's Union Square. The workers are members of the Student Employees at the New School union (SENS), an affiliate of the United Auto Workers (UAW).

In addition to taking classes as students, they have an exhausting workload as teachers and researchers, for which they are paid poverty wages in one of the least affordable cities in the world. RAs and TAs are paid for 20 hours of work per week, while the actual hours they log may be far more than that. A worker-student may receive a stipend of only \$6,000 a year.

It is virtually impossible to live on these wages. In the most unequal of American cities, the New School pays its president, David Van Zandt, a base salary of \$696,681, with total compensation reaching \$2,081,584.

Although no details have been released, the union announced in a leaflet that the university administration, after much delay, made an offer that fails to address the worker-students' demands for increases in wages, tuition remission, health care and childcare benefits.

The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) ruled last May that the New School worker-students had the right to unionize. Following a legal challenge to the decision filed by the university, the students took a vote in July 2017 and by a margin of 502 to 2 decided to join the union.

The UAW deliberately limited the impact of the strike by timing it for the period after classes had finished and finals had begun. With the support of more

than 300 faculty members, the union is seeking to apply pressure on the administration by disrupting grading.

The strike follows a similar action last month by worker-students at Columbia University in New York, members of Graduate Workers of Columbia-United Auto Workers (GWC-UAW) Local 2110. The Columbia strikers were protesting the failure of the university to recognize the union. That strike was also timed for the final days of classes and the union called it off before final exams began.

The UAW made sure that the two strikes took place at different times so as to prevent the two sections of worker-students from uniting in a broader action.

The UAW has for years been forcing through concessions contracts over widespread opposition from autoworkers and enforcing the hated two-tier and three-tier wage and benefit systems. In recent months it has been revealed that union bureaucrats who negotiated contracts were paid off by the auto companies to ram through sellout agreements.

The walkouts at the two universities coincide with strikes by teachers and other school workers throughout the country who are fighting against poverty wages, the lack of benefits and the defunding of public education. These struggles were initiated by rank-and-file teachers in opposition to the teachers unions, which were then able to get control and isolate and suppress them.

The New School is also laying off dozens of its cafeteria staff and planning to replace them with low-wage worker-students. The union to which these workers belong, UNITE-HERE Local 100, has done nothing to fight the layoffs, merely circulating a petition to the administration in a pathetic effort to disguise its complicity.

As with the mass teachers' strikes across the country, the unions at the universities are seeking to defuse

anger, disarm workers with empty promises and channel their anger into support for the Democratic Party.

Various pseudo-left groups in New York such as the Democratic Socialists of America have intervened in the Columbia and New School strikes to bolster the authority of the unions and the Democrats.

At the New School cafeteria, a small group of Maoists has occupied the facility in protest against the layoff of the workers. It is using this action, nothing more than a protest stunt, to conceal the reactionary role of the unions while promoting race and gender politics to divide the workers and students. The Maoists are keeping silent on the Democratic Party's anti-working class role locally (Democrats control both the city and state governments) and nationally, and its complicity with the Republicans in attacking public education.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to strikers and supporters at one of the picket lines.

Na, a PHD student in politics, told the WSWS: "I work for the minimum wage of \$15. I support the cafeteria workers. The conditions here are outrageous and I want to do as much as I can to help change them."

"The conditions facing teachers are insane, and now Trump proposes to give them guns. That's really not what they need. They need equipment."

"I definitely agree that all these struggles should be more united. Those questions are ultimately political. There are no discussions about how to balance the budget in America. They just keep raising the military budget."

Nick, an undergraduate student in media studies, said, "I support the strike just because I tend to stand with whatever advances student welfare. The New School has not been on top of it in terms of job security. I think it's disappointing that such an institution would not help students who work to study as hard as they can. I think people who study and work deserve more respect."

Aaron, a graduate student in philosophy who expects to become a teaching assistant in several months, came to join the picketing. He explained that the TA and RA strike is one of three labor struggles at the New School. "The student advisers, who play an essential role in supporting students, are being hit with massive benefit cuts," he said, "and the cafeteria workers are being

threatened with losing their jobs."

He added, "In addition to the teachers' strikes in the US, there is a wave of strikes and occupations internationally, like at the Sorbonne and the faculty-student occupation at York University in Toronto. We should all be together. There ought to be solidarity in these struggles."



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