

UAW negotiates secret deal with Columbia University to block strike action by graduate students

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The United Auto Workers (UAW) has reached a secret deal with the Columbia University administration on union recognition for graduate student and postdoctoral researchers that includes a clause blocking strikes and other work action.

According to documents released by the Graduate Workers of Columbia (GWC), the GWC bargaining committee was informed on November 18 that UAW Region 9A Director Beverly Brakeman and Columbia provost John Coatsworth had been conducting negotiations since sometime in October, completely unbeknownst to the members of the GWC and Columbia Postdoctoral Workers (CPW).

Under the concluded agreement, Columbia would drop its decades-long opposition to graduate and postdoctoral worker unionization and bargain with the GWC and CPW in exchange for a legal agreement not to strike or otherwise carry out any “interference with Columbia’s operations” until April 6, 2020. The agreement, which Columbia officials made public on November 19, requires that the deal be accepted by both unions no later than November 28.

The agreement came as the GWC was preparing to strike indefinitely on December 4, a week before final exams, if the university failed to agree to negotiate by November 30. It also occurs in the wake of massive strikes by teachers and other educators throughout the world earlier in the year.

If the GWC and CPW agree to the proposed framework, graduate students and researchers will be deprived of any legal ability to resist the administration’s demands while enshrining the UAW’s role in policing Columbia graduate workers and postdocs on behalf of the university. This would form

the basis for future unionization drives at other colleges and universities and ensure that any contracts that emerge would serve to keep wages down.

Moreover, by agreeing to the language of the agreement, which potentially covers a much wider range of actions than just strikes, the GWC and CPW would be unable to intervene on behalf of administrative and clerical workers at Columbia whose contract expires January 31.

By announcing the agreement just prior to the long holiday weekend and requiring such a quick decision to be made, Columbia and the UAW are hoping that they can ram through the agreement before any effective opposition can be mounted.

The UAW’s actions at Columbia are entirely in line with the role of the organization in the auto industry, where it functions as an arm of corporate management and an industrial police force. It has overseen the dismantling of large parts of the US auto industry and a series of historic concessions contracts. In 2009, the UAW worked closely with the Obama administration during the auto bailout, which resulted in new contracts imposing a 50 percent wage cut on new hires and essentially freezing wages for older workers.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, average hourly wages in the auto industry have remained between \$20 and \$23 per hour since 2001, an effective cut of around 40 percent to average pay when adjusted for inflation. At parts manufacturers, the UAW has agreed to poverty wages of \$11 per hour to start.

The 2015 contracts, which the UAW rammed through over mass opposition, expanded the tier system and the relentless speedups. The organization is presently engulfed in a corruption scandal exposing the fact that

it accepted direct payments from auto executives in exchange for pushing through concessions contracts.

From a peak membership of 1.5 million members in 1979, membership in the UAW now stands at just under 431,000. The UAW increasingly relies on dues increases and unionization drives among clerical and education workers to make up for their lost dues base, from which they derive their wealth and privileges.

According to the union's filing with the US Labor Department, the UAW had \$1.06 billion in assets in 2017. It had \$684 million in investments in private equity firms and other financial institutions and another \$170 million in US Treasury securities. In 2017, the UAW received \$6.2 million from GM, Ford and Fiat Chrysler through joint training programs, which are at the center of the multimillion-dollar bribery scandal.

The UAW's top 15 executives collected a total of \$2.4 million in salaries, including \$181,046 for retiring president Dennis Williams. Another \$73 million was spent on its salaried staff of 676 servicing reps, organizers, stenographers and other positions, which often are reserved for relatives of union executives.

The UAW collected \$175 million in dues and fees from its members and spent \$99.5 million on "representational activities," another \$29 million on "union administration" and "general overhead" costs, \$7 million in political activities and lobbying and only \$2.7 million on strike benefits.

In an effort to cover its own role, the Barnard-Columbia branch of the International Socialist Organization (ISO) has issued a statement calling for a "no" vote on the agreement. The ISO functions as a public relations arm for the unions, attempting to convince workers that these bankrupt organizations represent their interests. Having fostered illusions in the unions, the ISO's call for a rejection of the deal is a form of damage control to keep themselves from being discredited.

The aspirations of the Columbia graduate student and postdoctoral researchers are entirely legitimate, and their anger at the UAW's betrayal is wholly justified. There is widespread hostility among graduate student workers at Columbia, many of whom have signed a petition calling for a rejection of the deal, and particularly its no-strike clause.

Graduate student and postdoctoral workers at Columbia should reject the framework agreement.

However, in order to fight the low wages and highly exploitative conditions characteristic of contingent academic labor, workers need new organizations controlled by the rank-and-file and completely independent of the unions.

Such rank-and-file committees draw up their own demands to meet the needs of graduate students and turn to the broad mass of workers facing declining wages and attacks on benefits and working conditions.

The WSWS Autoworker Newsletter is holding an emergency online meeting Wednesday night at 8 p.m. EST/7 p.m. CST. The meeting will discuss a strategy for GM, Lear, and all other autoworkers to unify their struggle against the companies and the corporate-controlled UAW. To receive information on how to attend, text Autoworker to 555888, or register here.



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