Columbia University graduate workers overwhelmingly authorize strike

Josh Varlin
23 March 2020

Graduate workers at Columbia University, an Ivy League university in New York City, voted by 96 percent to authorize a possible strike after their no-strike agreement expires on April 6. The vote, organized by the Graduate Workers of Columbia-United Auto Workers (GWC-UAW), was held March 2-13 and the results were announced March 19.

Of those who voted, 1,833 graduate workers supported authorizing a strike and 77 opposed.

Due to the ongoing novel coronavirus pandemic, the vote was held partially online. The university has moved to all-online classes, with instruction resuming March 26 after spring break was extended to give faculty and students additional time to adjust.

GWC members include teaching assistants (TAs) and research assistants (RAs). As Columbia has paused all research not associated with combating the pandemic, TAs are the main contingent that could strike upon expiration of the no-strike clause.

While graduate workers cannot physically assemble, they could still refuse to teach courses online and grade work. However, the transition to online instruction, along with the mandatory pass/fail grading scheme, may make it easier for the university to force professors to scab on their TAs.

The GWC is currently negotiating with Columbia University administration on the first union-negotiated contract that would cover graduate workers. In November 2018, the union agreed to a no-strike clause until April 6, 2020, under a secret deal negotiated by the UAW Region 9A Director Beverly Brakeman and Provost John Coatsworth without the knowledge of the members or leaders of the GWC.

The deal also applies to postdoctoral researchers and assistant research scientists who are members of the Columbia Postdoctoral Workers (CPW), which is also affiliated with the UAW and which was also kept in the dark about the rotten deal. The CPW has not held a strike authorization vote.

The fall 2018 deal followed a strike during the spring 2018 semester. While the UAW announced ahead of time the strike would only last a week—and therefore end before final exams—the walkout showed the strength of graduate workers and came amid a still-ongoing wave of strike action by education workers internationally, beginning with the West Virginia teachers strike.

While tentative agreements have been reached on some issues, many remain ostensibly up for discussion, including wages, benefits and grievances. For example, the UAW is proposing a miserly $43,500 annual floor for doctoral student workers, whereas Columbia proposes that wage decisions be left up to academic departments. The GWC is also asking for an outside arbitrator to examine alleged cases of sexual harassment and discrimination. The administration had originally agreed to this, but has since reneged, claiming that it would not be legal under Title IX.

For many of the outstanding issues, Columbia is claiming that they are academic issues rather than employment issues, and thus not subject to collective bargaining.

Tellingly, according to the GWC website, Columbia has proposed a no-strike clause, to which the union has not replied or made a counter-offer. No doubt publicly accepting this is being kept for the end of negotiations.

Anger is seething among educators internationally. Of particular note is the wildcat strike of graduate workers at the University of California Santa Cruz (UCSC), which spread across the University of California system. In New York City itself, Mayor Bill de Blasio agreed to close the city’s public school

© World Socialist Web Site

system—a necessary measure to slow down the coronavirus pandemic—belatedly only after teachers threatened job action.

The role of the unions, and the UAW in particular, must be understood by graduate workers at Columbia. The powerful UC strike was only possible because graduate workers began breaking out of the straitjacket imposed by the UAW, of which they are also members. The UC grad students are striking to demand a significant cost-of-living wage increase because the contract signed by the UAW includes poverty wages that make it impossible to afford the skyrocketing rents in Santa Cruz and other California cities.

The UAW is now attempting to wind down the strike in favor of an "unfair labor practices" strike in April, with the UAW accusing the UC administration of negotiating with the students directly, rather than with the union!

At the same time, UC President Janet Napolitano, the former Secretary of Homeland Security under President Obama, has fired 82 striking grad students for the "crime" of breaking free for the slave's charter the UAW signed with the UC administration, which includes poverty wages and a no-strike pledge.

The GWC, which often promotes other graduate unions on its Facebook and Twitter pages, was silent on the UC wildcat strike until recently, when it shared a union-sponsored petition asking the UC administration to bargain with the UAW there.

Nothing exposes the role of the UAW more than its attempt to force autoworkers to remain in infected factories after several workers tested positive for COVID-19. Despite repeated demands from workers to close production, the UAW sided with management and insisted that workers keep pumping out profits for the corporations. Workers revolted, refusing to be "killed on the line," and downed their tools in factories across Michigan, Ohio, Indiana and other states. At the Toledo, Ohio, Jeep plant workers angrily confronted UAW officials.

The anti-worker nature of the union is also expressed in the UAW corruption scandal. Over a dozen leading UAW officials have been indicted or pleaded guilty in an expanding corruption scandal, where officials have been charged with or admitted to taking company bribes and misusing workers' dues money for personal expenses. Two former UAW presidents, Gary Jones and Dennis Williams, are among those implicated.

Columbia graduate workers can place no faith in this rotten organization, which is corrupt to the bone, whether or not a strike is ultimately called. The UAW has turned to "organizing" academic workers as its industrial membership collapsed through decades of plant closures aided and abetted at each turn by the UAW, with membership now below a third of its 1979 peak of 1.5 million workers.

It is not just the UAW that no longer represents even minimally the interests of workers, however, but the trade unions as a whole, which are nationally limited, pro-capitalist and allied with the corporate-controlled Democratic Party. Another union which claims to "represent" graduate workers, the American Federation of Teachers, has also sold out other grad students—including at the University of Illinois. The AFT and its counterpart, the National Education Association (NEA) have been instrumental in betraying the wave of teacher strikes over the last two years against social inequality and the austerity measures imposed by both the Democrats and Republicans.

Grad students like all sections of workers need organizations to fight. That is why they must build rank-and-file committees to organize university workers and unite with all sections of the working class. The corporate and political establishment in the US has done nothing to seriously protect the population from the pandemic and instead hopes to use this crisis to funnel even more money into the stock markets and the bank accounts of the super-rich. That is why the fight to defend the most elementar conditions of grad students is bound up with a fight to unify all workers in the US and around the world to demand a program of action to fight the pandemic and its social and economic consequences.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site