

# Columbia University graduate workers strike against university's COVID-19 response

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Hundreds of graduate workers at Columbia University in New York City began a strike on April 24, demanding that the university sufficiently address the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on their lives, scholarship and research. Beginning on May 1, the strike will extend into a rent strike for residents of university-owned housing.

The strikers are demanding emergency measures including, according to a graphic released by strike organizer Danielle Carr, cancellation of rent in university housing, extending funding and time to complete degree requirements by one year, the protection of international students, an emergency stipend and the ending of “university austerity to schools.”

Columbia, located in the city with the most confirmed COVID-19 cases in the world, moved to all-online instruction in mid-March. Most students left their dormitories by March 17. However, Columbia also owns non-dormitory housing, which many graduate students rent and for which rent has not been canceled. Graduate teaching assistants are still instructing and grading students remotely as part of their work.

Strikers have stopped teaching, but will not submit grades for students as the spring semester nears its end. Beginning on May 1, the graduate students will also begin a rent strike.

Housing is a major concern even under normal circumstances. Many stipends amount to little more than rent for a bedroom in a university-owned apartment, which for one student who spoke to *New York* magazine is \$1,400 a month. Students who were relying on subletting their unit during the summer months are out of luck given the cancellation of summer programs.

According to the *Columbia Spectator*, the university

will give graduate students on nine-month appointments \$3,000, although that is unlikely to be much better than the two months of rent relief it gave small commercial tenants.

Many Columbia programs are in danger due to the financial impact of the pandemic, which is expected to decimate tuition, clinical income, government grants and private support. The university has already announced hiring and salary freezes.

The Columbia strike follows an earlier strike authorization vote in March which resulted in a resounding 96 percent “yes” vote. That vote, which was partially held online due to the pandemic, indicated the desire of students to fight.

As of this writing, it is not clear whether the strike is officially sanctioned by the graduate students’ union, the Graduate Workers of Columbia-United Auto Workers (GWC-UAW), or whether the strike is a wildcat action. A general membership meeting of the union voted in favor of striking, but the strike is opposed by the union’s bargaining committee. The only mention, as of this writing, of the strike by the UAW is a terse statement which says: “The Bargaining Committee voted 5–3 against calling a strike under the current circumstances. We will continue to fight for a strong contract and fair solutions to problems rising from the COVID-19 crisis. We expect Columbia to respect the student workers’ rights to engage in collective action.”

Regardless of whether the strike has the formal sanction of the UAW, it is clear that the strike has broken out against the opposition of the corrupt union apparatus. The last strike at Columbia, in the fall of 2018, was scuttled by the union in a secret deal negotiated between regional union bureaucrats and the university administration. The deal contained a no-

strike clause which only expired on April 6.

The notoriously corrupt UAW, with over a dozen leading UAW officials indicted or convicted in an expanding federal corruption probe, has worked to sell out one strike after another over the course of decades, including graduate strikes at Harvard and UC Santa Cruz and last year's nationwide strike at General Motors.

During the pandemic, it closed ranks with management at the US automakers to keep workers on the line, until a wildcat strike wave in mid-March forced the automakers to shut production in North America. The UAW is now working hand in glove to get workers back into the plants as soon as possible .

In striking, Columbia graduate workers are joining an international strike wave in defense of workers' lives and livelihoods, especially since the coronavirus pandemic began. Workers in auto, appliance manufacturing, grocery delivery, logistics and health care have struck or carried out other job actions demanding personal protective equipment, the end of nonessential production and that the economy is "reopened" only when it is safe to do so.

This strike wave immediately raises the question of who controls society's resources, superseding individual contract struggles. It is clear that, to minimize death and disruption, what is absolutely necessary is the marshaling of resources to ensure safe working conditions for essential workers, conducive educational conditions for students learning remotely and telecommuting for as many workers as possible.

Those unable to work remotely whose work is not essential must be made whole economically. Those impacted by the pandemic, including researchers, should receive support to resume when it is safe to do so.

The only way to ensure that resources are allocated toward social need, including education and health, rather than private profit, is a political struggle to end the capitalist system.



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