

The way forward for NYU graduate students

Break with the unions and turn to the working class!

International Youth and Students for Social Equality at New York University
5 October 2020

Since July, the Graduate Student Organizing Committee (GSOC), which is affiliated with the United Auto Workers (UAW) union and has over 2,000 graduate workers as members at New York University, has been involved in contract negotiations with the university administration. The previous contract, negotiated by GSOC and the university in 2015, expired on Aug. 31. GSOC has agreed to a second extension of the contract, which includes a no-strike clause, until Oct. 13.

GSOC is affiliated with the UAW Local 2110, an amalgamated union that has repeatedly negotiated concessionary contracts for workers throughout New York City.

GSOC granted these extensions to the university even though NYU has done nothing but stonewall university workers' demands for higher stipends and wages, financial compensation for hardships that have resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic, safe working conditions, proper health care coverage, and protection of international student workers. GSOC has also called for NYU to cut its ties with the New York Police Department (NYPD).

NYU only presented minor counterproposals in late September, including one on sending out appointment letters early (21 days before the job starts) and one on child care benefits, which has fallen far short of the needs of grad workers with children.

This was to be expected. NYU, one of the largest and most expensive private universities in the United States, embodies the broader subordination of academia to private profit and the interests of the corporate-financial oligarchy. For decades, the university has exhibited complete disregard for the well-being of students, staff and faculty, carrying out vicious attacks on workers, subordinating student mental health and food insecurity to profit interests and repeatedly demonstrating utter contempt for the most basic democratic rights.

The decision to reopen NYU on Sept. 2 under a so-called "hybrid model" against the advice of medical experts was likewise dictated by the interests of the millionaire administrators and collection of multi-millionaires and billionaires that make up the NYU Board of Trustees. It is endangering countless lives not just at NYU but throughout New York City.

Already, there are 248 total reported COVID-19 cases across all NYU campus locations in New York and an explosion of cases is inevitable as a second wave of the virus in New York City is triggered by Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio and Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo's push to fully reopen schools and businesses.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at NYU fully support the struggle of graduate students for higher wages and stipends and better child care and health care benefits. We call upon graduate students to develop their struggle on the basis of the following demands:

- An end to all in-person classes! There can be no "safe reopening" under conditions of a raging pandemic. In a tragic proof of this fact, just a few days ago, Chad Dorrill, a 19-year-old student at Appalachian State University in North Carolina, died from neurological complications resulting from COVID-19, after taking classes under a hybrid model similar to the one being used at NYU.

- The university must meet all needs for technology by students and workers alike to enable remote learning. No student or worker must be allowed to suffer in their educational work from lack of technological equipment.

- Free tuition for all! Graduate student workers must receive a living wage and stipend. Education is a social right, not a privilege.

- Child care and health care for all university students and workers, including graduate workers, must be fully covered by the university. This includes additional needs and expenses from remote teaching and learning and COVID infections.

- Protect international students and immigrants! No to deportations and visa cancellations. Every worker and youth has the right to live, study and work wherever they choose, with full rights of citizenship.

The fight for these demands cannot be conducted without a broader understanding of the socioeconomic and political crisis unfolding in the US and around the world. It requires a strategy that is oriented toward the broadest layers of the working class and has to be conducted in complete independence from the Democratic Party and trade unions like the UAW which have proven bitterly hostile to the interests of workers.

NYU's decision to reopen is part and parcel of a much broader, homicidal policy that lies at the heart of the reopening of universities. The American ruling class, like its counterparts internationally, has fully embraced the murderous strategy of "herd immunity," letting the virus rip through the population without restraint. Workers must be herded back into the factories to produce the surplus value needed to pay for the mountain of corporate and government debt that has resulted from trillion-dollar handouts to Wall Street and major corporations.

This policy has been entirely bipartisan, backed by Republicans and Democrats alike. At every step of the way, it has been aided and abetted by the trade unions who have forced workers back into schools and factories. All these political forces bear responsibility for the 215,000 deaths and well over seven million that have been infected in the US alone. Health experts forecast that by the end of the year 410,000 people will be dead in the US from COVID-19; equal to the total number of American soldiers killed during World War II.

While workers are suffering unprecedented mass death, social misery and unemployment, the rich have only gotten richer. These staggering levels of social inequality are incompatible with even

nominally democratic forms of rule.

These class tensions, and the growing resistance within the working class, underlie the open preparations by the Trump administration for a coup d'état and the build-up of a fascist movement in the US. The administration is preparing to mobilize armed, fascist organizations across the country to intimidate and attack voters at the polls, while the police and sections of the military will be used to violently suppress mass opposition to Trump's refusal to leave office. The *Wall Street Journal* has already reported that the NYPD is training to suppress mass protests after Election Day.

Trump's recent COVID-19 diagnosis has only temporarily obstructed the coup plot. The fundamental trajectory of the social and political crisis has not changed and the danger of the establishment of dictatorship remains very real.

The Democratic Party has offered no opposition whatsoever to the Trump administration. On the contrary, its response has been to downplay the obvious and significant danger that exists and demobilize opposition to the coup. The utter fecklessness of Democratic Party opposition to Trump is not the result of mistaken policy or "learned helplessness," but dictated by the class interests that it represents. As one of the oldest capitalist parties in the world, the Democratic Party solely defends the interests of Wall Street and American imperialism. Its opposition to Trump comes mainly from disagreements on how best to conduct great power conflict with Russia and China. However, far more than Trump or dictatorship, the Democrats fear a mass movement by the working class in opposition to capitalism.

This fear also underlies their attempt to divide the working masses along racial lines through the endless promotion of racial and identity politics by the Democrats and their mouthpieces like the *New York Times*. In their efforts to quell working class resistance, the Democrats are aided by the trade union bureaucracies.

For decades, the UAW has aided management in attacking the workers it supposedly represents in exchange for the enrichment of a small layer of union executives. Over the last year, more than a dozen top UAW officials pleaded guilty to federal corruption charges and many more are under investigation. NYU graduate student workers are not unaware of the treachery of the UAW. The three-day sick-out action in early May, organized by graduate students, was actively condemned by the UAW.

The politics of GSOC, which is dominated by the perspective of upper-middle class politics of pseudo-left organizations like the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), subordinates workers and youth to the Democratic Party and offers no way forward.

GSOC has not opposed in principle the dangerous reopening of NYU. Moreover, it has not called and prepared for a strike, even though it would enjoy broad support not just among grad students but the student body and workers at NYU and beyond.

Instead, GSOC has advanced reactionary and divisive demands for racial quotas in the hiring of both faculty and graduate workers. In its negotiations with NYU, GSOC is demanding: "The Union shall have the right to define additional social, economic, and identity categories (such as but not limited to sexual orientation, gender expression, income, family income, or religious background) to be used in the collection of data concerning graduate student application, acceptance, enrollment, and employment as part of the University's Affirmative Action Plan."

Such demands have nothing to do with the interests of workers and students. Rather, they serve the social interests of aspiring layers of

the middle class that seek to carve out more academic positions for themselves and divert the real social and political issues facing workers and students at NYU and beyond. They also aid the ruling class in its effort to divide the working class along racial and ethnic lines.

Graduate workers at NYU must draw the lessons from the graduate student strike at the University of Michigan in September. Despite a courageous struggle for almost two weeks, the strike was ultimately betrayed by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO). Graduate students were pressured to go back to work with racist arguments, including that the strike would put "black and brown lives at risk." The deal reached between the GEO and the university ultimately included concessions on racist demands advanced by the GEO, while abandoning grad students' demands for remote-only teaching and leaving their social and economic needs unmet.

The fight for the social and economic rights of graduate students can only be successful if it is based on the principles of social equality and connected to a powerful movement by the working class that is directed against the capitalist system as a whole. Such a movement has already begun to emerge. Rank-and-file committees, independent from the Democratic Party and the trade unions, have been built by auto and transport workers, students, and educators in the US, Germany, Britain and Australia.

The struggle against the pandemic, the economic and social crisis, endless police killings and the dangers of fascism and war must be combined, and a political general strike prepared. The resources needed to satisfy social needs must be obtained by expropriating the billionaires and reorganizing economic life on a socialist basis.

We call upon graduate students to link up their struggle with that of workers in the US and internationally.

Break from the Democratic Party and the trade unions!

Form independent committees to prepare for a strike!

We encourage all students and workers at NYU who want to take up this fight to contact the IYSSE at NYU today.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact