

Over 2,200 students at Columbia University threaten tuition strike amid economic crisis

Elliott Murtagh
7 December 2020

Students at Columbia University in New York City have launched plans for a tuition strike demanding decreased tuition and increased financial aid in 2021. The petition announcing the strike has grown to over 2,200 student pledges.

Columbia University is one of the most expensive universities in the country, costing over \$60,000 a year, has one of the largest university endowments in the country, currently at \$11.26 billion, and is one of the largest private landowners in New York City. Columbia recently reported an increase of \$310 million to their endowment from returns in the university's stock portfolio this year.

Meanwhile, students face a dire economic situation as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is beginning to rage uncontrolled once again in New York City, under Democratic Party leadership. The current threat of tuition strike follows a strike in April by Columbia University graduate workers demanding the university sufficiently address the impact of the pandemic on their lives, scholarship and research.

The strike campaign, which extends to the Columbia-affiliated schools of Barnard College and Teachers College, was initiated by the Columbia University-Barnard College chapter of the Young Democratic Socialists of America (YDSA).

The primary demands of the tuition strike call for a reduction of the total cost of attendance by at least 10 percent and an increase of financial aid by at least 10 percent.

Other listed demands include ending university expansion in West Harlem, defunding Columbia's Public Safety security force, divesting from fossil fuels and from companies tied to human rights violations, protections for international students, and granting union recognition for student workers to bargain for improved compensation and benefits.

The tuition strike, which entails withholding university payments, would be set to begin during the first scheduled payment for the Spring semester: December 14 for Barnard College and January 20 for Columbia and Teachers College students.

A collection of student testimonials in support of the strike points to the dire economic situation and financial hardship facing students as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the administration's failure to adequately address community demands throughout the year.

One student wrote, "Members of the community are deeply suffering and could use the help of this prestigious and far reaching institute. Many, too many, have gone into financial debt for professions that no longer exist. To work in industries that have completely shut down. We are drowning... There's no such thing as returning back to normal. For many, 'normal' consisted of barely keeping our head above water."

One nursing student stated, "We are the future generation of healthcare workers. We play an important role in keeping the public safe and fighting this very pandemic, yet our educational needs are not being met. We are asked to sacrifice everything and be selfless, only to be taken advantage of."

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in New York and New Jersey express our solidarity with all students who are forced to take out massive loans in order to get an education and who are struggling every day to pay them off. However, students who are looking for a way to fight back against the social and economic crisis facing young people today need to understand the political issues involved in this struggle.

Student debt plagues working class youth and their families throughout the country, and in fact, around the world.

For those who have student loans, the average student

today leaves college with \$37,172 of debt. Nationally, college debt stands at a staggering \$1.56 trillion. College tuition has increased by 1,140 percent since the late 1970s. Despite this massive spike in tuition over the last five decades, the median household income has remained the same since 1999.

Students who take out loans to go to college often spend the majority of their lives trying to pay them off. Under pandemic conditions, in which unemployment figures are at the highest they have been since the Great Depression, taking on student debt can quickly lead to financial ruin.

Even if successful, the reduction of tuition at Columbia by 10 percent—from \$64,000 to \$57,600—will do little to alleviate this immense crisis facing workers and youth at Columbia, let alone the millions of students and their families across the country.

The astronomical rise in student debt over the past several decades is part of an overall attack on education overseen by both Democrats and Republicans. This includes the systematic dismantling of public schools through privatization and the promotion of charter schools and the transformation of universities into profit-making enterprises subordinated to the interests of giant corporations and the military-intelligence apparatus.

Whether it is under Bush, Obama or Trump, these tendencies have continued relentlessly.

The orientation of the YDSA, which initiated the petition, is to the Democratic Party, which has facilitated the relentless destruction of public education, the increases in tuition, and the destruction of jobs and wages.

Christian Flores, a Columbia University graduate student and member of the YDSA and leader of the tuition strike made this orientation clear in an interview he gave to CBS News on Monday, when he noted that it was “quite poetic that tuition is due on January 20th when that is also the inauguration of President Biden.” He added that he hoped the movement would allow students to have a “seat at the table”—that is, that it would help to pressure the incoming Biden administration to take action on student debt.

The student debt crisis will not be solved by getting “a seat at the table” in a Biden administration. If Biden comes to power, the policy that his administration implements will be dictated by Wall Street and the military. Biden has already made this clear in the composition of his proposed cabinet.

The role of the Democratic Socialists of America and its youth movement the YDSA has always been to sow illusions that the Democratic Party can be reformed. After

campaigning for Bernie Sanders unsuccessfully for five years, the organization went all in for Biden in the final months of the campaign cycle, mobilizing all their resources to get out the vote.

What is needed to combat the student debt crisis, like all of the major crises facing workers and youth under capitalism, is the independent mobilization of the working class against the capitalist system in opposition to the Republican and Democratic parties.

While President-elect Joe Biden accepts the continuation of death on a mass scale, proclaiming, “I’m not going to shut down the economy, period,” the Democratic Party celebrates his incoming cabinet of thoroughly right-wing imperialist reaction as “the most diverse in US history.”

Combating the widespread economic and social issues facing students and youth not only at Columbia, but internationally, requires a political understanding that these issues are the direct products of capitalism and are fundamentally class issues. In response, a political program is needed, based on expropriating the wealth of the ruling class to guarantee the right to free education and cancellation of all student debt, free housing, free healthcare, and safe working and learning conditions—that is, the establishment of a society based on social need.

Above all, this requires a turn to and independent mobilization of the international working class, the only social force capable of leading the progressive reorganization of society, and the building of an international party fighting to connect struggles across workplaces and campuses and equip workers and youth with a socialist perspective grounded in history, theory, and science. The Socialist Equality Party and IYSSE sections around the globe are leading this fight.

We urge all youth and students in the New York area interested in learning more to register for and attend the IYSSE in New York and New Jersey’s public meeting, this Wednesday, December 9, at 6PM, entitled, “The crisis of capitalism & the fight for socialism: The way forward after the election.”



To contact the WSWP and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wswp.org/contact](https://www.wswp.org/contact)