

The Columbia University tuition strike and the fight for socialism

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More than 1,100 undergraduate and graduate students at Columbia University in New York City are participating in a tuition strike, which began on January 22, to demand decreased tuition costs and increased financial aid. The strike action, which has support from over 4,300 students at Columbia, comes amid a dire international social and economic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, which continues to rage out of control under Democratic Party leadership on the city, state, and now national level.

The student debt crisis is an international phenomenon and often plagues the life of a young person for decades. In the US, total college debt amounts to a whopping \$1.56 trillion, with students leaving college with an average of \$37,000 in student loans.

The tuition strike coincides with a rent strike by 15,000 students across universities in the UK against mistreatment and exploitation throughout the pandemic.

Columbia University costs over \$60,000 a year, has a massive endowment of over \$11 billion—which added \$310 million in the first half of 2020 from the university’s stock portfolio and has surely gone up since then—and is one of the largest private landowners in New York City.

The tuition strike campaign, which also includes Columbia-affiliated Barnard College and Teachers College, was organized by the Columbia University-Barnard College chapter of the Young Democratic Socialists of America (YDSA) and was launched in October.

The main demands of the strike call for a 10 percent decrease in tuition costs and 10 percent increase in financial aid, while other demands include ending the university’s 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.

In December, Columbia announced it would provide increased financial aid for the Spring semester, and more recently, announced that the university “does not hold any direct investments in publicly traded oil and gas companies, and is formalizing this policy of non-investment for the foreseeable future.” The YDSA has proclaimed these actions as huge wins of the tuition strike and the university conceding to their demands, despite Columbia refuting this.

In response to the tuition strike, Columbia released the following statement: “This is a moment when an active reappraisal of the status quo is understandable, and we expect nothing less from our students. Their voices are heard by Columbia’s leadership, and their views on strengthening the University are welcomed.” However, Columbia is fining all students who withhold tuition payments a monthly late fee of \$150.

Currently, the YDSA is warning of shutting down the strike in the coming weeks due to the university’s implementation of these fees, which the tuition strike opposes. At a tuition strike town hall last week, YDSA leaders focused the discussion on when to end the strike, while stating that “All of these demands, I don’t think we’ll win outright.”

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE)—the youth movement of the Socialist Equality Party—in New York and New Jersey strongly supports the fight taken up by students at Columbia to address the student debt crisis and strongly encourages the strike to continue. However, the struggle for the elimination of student debt and the right to free education can only be carried forward by broadening the strike and directly connecting it to the fight for genuine socialism. This requires a political break with the Democratic Party and forces such as the DSA.

The Columbia tuition strike’s current call to reduce

tuition by 10 percent—from \$64,000 to \$57,600— will do little to solve the immense crisis facing students today.

As the WSWS emphasized in an earlier article on the tuition strike:

Combatting 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.

The past year contains rich political lessons for workers and youth. The capitalist system has completely failed to respond adequately in any remote sense to the pandemic. Both capitalist parties, the Democrats and the Republicans, have been putting forth the homicidal policy of herd immunity which has killed more than 450,000 people in the US. They have dumped trillions of dollars to prop up financial markets and corporations, while forcing the working class to bear the brunt of the crisis and sacrifice lives for the profits of the super-rich. Under these conditions, there has been a major lurch to the right by the entire US political establishment. The Trump administration has systematically built up far-right forces, culminating in the Trump-led January 6 fascist coup attempt that was aimed at overthrowing the results of the presidential elections. Fearing nothing but a mobilization of workers, the Democratic Party has sought to cover up the extent of the coup and the involvement of sections of the ruling class, the state and the military in it.

Amidst this horrific breakdown of capitalism, pseudo-left tendencies like the Democratic Socialists of America, promote the illusion that capitalism can still be reformed and that the Democratic Party, one of the oldest capitalist parties in the world, can be pressured to the left. In a panel entitled “Organizing for socialism” at a Columbia

YDSA teach-in on the first day of the tuition strike, Eric Blanc spoke of how to “build power within the state to transform it” in order to “win the gains we need,” while Micah Uetrich, an assistant editor for the DSA-affiliated *Jacobin*, said that “we are stuck with” the Democratic Party.

This is a political dead end. The dismantling and defunding of public education, the enormous rise in college debt, and the destruction of jobs and wages have been facilitated by the Democratic Party. Workers and youth cannot take a step forward without breaking from both parties of Wall Street and the military. Students at Columbia should take heed of the role the DSA has played in betraying workers’ struggles, including, most recently, the Hunts Point produce market strike in New York City. It should also be noted that Eric Blanc, who was invited to speak by the YDSA at Columbia, is the author of *Red State Revolt* and played a key role in developing the political line for the DSA in response to a series of wildcat teacher strikes in 2018–2019 that developed in rebellion against the unions. The DSA’s role in these strikes was to prevent a political break by teachers with the unions and the Democratic Party.

Critical workers’ struggles are beginning to break out in the US and internationally. In Brazil, teachers have gone on strike to protest the homicidal policy of school reopening. In Chicago, teachers are also fighting against the dangerous reopening of schools. This is the social force that students at Columbia should orient to in fighting for the broadening of their own struggle. We urge students and young people who agree with this perspective to contact us, sign up to join the IYSSE and help build the international struggle against capitalism and for socialism.



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