

Columbia University graduate workers begin strike for better working and living conditions

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Today over 3,000 student workers at Columbia University in New York City are going on strike after more than two years of unsuccessful negotiations with the administration over the college's first graduate student labor contract.

The struggle comes more than four years after student workers voted to unionize, forming the Graduate Workers of Columbia-United Auto Workers (GWC-UAW). It comes on the heels of a graduate student worker strike just last year, organized against the university's inadequate response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The graduate worker strike action coincides with a tuition strike at Columbia by more than 1,100 undergraduate and graduate students demanding decreased tuition costs and increased financial aid. It is also taking place as 1,200 graduate student workers at New York University (NYU) are threatening to strike over the same deteriorating working conditions and benefits. The outbreak of these struggles reflects a broader resurgence of the class struggle, including the recent six-day strike by 1,400 produce workers at the Hunts Point Market in the Bronx.

Columbia research and teaching assistants covered under the GWC-UAW are demanding living wages, expanded health benefits, job protections, and fee and tuition waivers. The graduate students are also fighting for a contract without a "no strike" clause, which the university administration has rejected in over 65 bargaining sessions, "stonewalling" negotiations.

The strike has widespread support among the student workers, with an authorization vote passing last year by a 96 percent majority.

Columbia Provost and Political Science and History Professor Ira Katznelson, formerly a political strategist for the UAW, issued a statement last week contemptuously denouncing the upcoming work stoppage as "both regrettable and unnecessary."

Attempting to guilt struggling graduate workers out of striking and pit them against the university community, Katznelson said a strike would be a "significant burden that our campus would be compelled to bear ... during one of the

most stressful times in the history of students, staff, and faculty at Columbia."

While admitting that teaching assistants have been "remarkably effective, sometimes heroic" for "the thousands of students who have been grappling with non-traditional education," Katznelson called for these university "heroes" to embrace "mutual realism" when it comes to bargaining, which "no single round can produce optimal results." In regard to higher wage compensation, the provost bluntly stated that "there are lines we are unable to cross."

Columbia has made clear its intentions to retaliate against striking student workers by docking their pay and financial aid stipends during the duration of the strike, which is set to go on indefinitely until a bargaining contract is agreed upon. The university has created an on-line daily work-reporting system to identify all workers on strike. The administration has even sent an email to the student body asking students to report striking workers to their academic departments.

The undergraduate students responded by setting up a hardship fund for striking workers on March 10, which has already surpassed \$39,000 in donations and shows an outpouring of support for student workers trying to make ends meet. However, part of the reason this hardship fund is needed in the first place is due to the United Auto Workers' measly strike pay cap of only \$275 per week, while the national union sits on a strike fund of close to \$800 million.

In response to the administrative pressure, the union is lowering its demands. According to the GWC-UAW's own bargaining updates, on Friday's bargaining session—three days before the strike deadline—the union dropped the minimum salary for 12-month Ph.D. worker appointments from \$45,850 to \$43,596 and dropped the minimum hourly rate for graduate workers from \$35/hour to \$28/hour and from \$26/hour to \$22/hour for undergraduate workers. Meanwhile, the university has been steadfast on settling on a minimum hourly rate of \$16/hour for student workers, only \$1 above New York City's minimum wage.

According to glassdoor.com, the base salary for research assistants at Columbia is \$36,000 and \$26,000 for teaching

assistants. These poverty level wages are all the more devastating for workers living in one of the most expensive cities in the world. In addition, the cost of tuition for a Master's student at Columbia is over \$51,000, which does not include housing, food and books.

The administration has repeatedly pointed to financial strains on the university due to the pandemic in order to justify its actions. This is a blatant lie. Columbia has major ties to Wall Street and an endowment of over \$11 billion. It would be more accurate to say that the university is using the crisis to make students and workers pay for their losses through higher forms of exploitation.

The situation at Columbia University must be seen in the broader context of a wholesale attack on, and restructuring of, higher education. Utilizing the pandemic crisis, universities and colleges are forcing through long sought after budget cuts and lower wages.

In fact, last month, the Department of Labor reported that colleges and universities across the country cut a total of 650,000 jobs in the past year, equal to a 13 percent total work force reduction. These cuts include 2,800 adjunct professor layoffs at the City University of New York (CUNY) system last summer.

In the face of these attacks, graduate workers are taking a courageous stand by striking for better working and living conditions for themselves and for the rights of students and workers more broadly.

However, it is critical for all students and workers engaged in this struggle to understand that the immense economic, social and political crisis they face cannot be resolved on isolated campuses. Rather, their fight requires a strategy that is oriented toward the broadest layers of the working class. Such a struggle must 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.

The UAW functions as a mid-sized corporation whose primary business is providing and policing a low-cost workforce for General Motors, Ford and Fiat-Chrysler. This fact has been well documented throughout the years-long exposure of a massive corruption scandal engulfing the entire union leadership.

Its history of "representing" graduate students has been no different than its history with autoworkers.

In 2018, UAW leadership negotiated a secret deal with the Columbia University administration, unbeknownst to the members of the GWC, to block any GWC strike action—the most powerful tool at workers' disposal—until April 6, 2020. It is noteworthy that Columbia is again seeking a "no strike" clause for the current contract in negotiation.

In 2020, graduate student strikes at Harvard and

UC Santa Cruz were forcefully shut down by the UAW in complete capitulation to the universities, without winning demands of the striking students, while a three-day grad worker sickout at NYU in May, protesting the university's negligent and callous response to the coronavirus pandemic, was condemned by the UAW.

Now, as Columbia students are prepared to take a stand, the UAW is conceding on all the main demands—demands that clearly have wide support among student workers.

No progressive struggle can be waged within the framework of the UAW and the AFL-CIO trade union apparatus, which has done everything it can to suppress opposition among workers to the homicidal policy of the ruling class in response to the pandemic.

The formation of independent rank-and-file organizations involving the broadest layers of workers, students, and young people fighting to defend the right to free high quality education, decent jobs and living wages, and full health care is urgently needed. Emerging student and worker struggles on campuses and workplaces, including at Columbia, must link up and call for their widest expansion nationally and internationally.

The issues affecting graduate students at Columbia University are the same issues facing millions of workers and young people across the country, and, in fact, throughout the world. To wage a successful struggle requires the intervention and unification of all workers in opposition to a social and economic order which breeds inequality, unemployment, fascism, and war: capitalism. Turn out to the working class, and take up the fight for socialism!

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee in New York is taking up this initiative, and all student workers at Columbia are encouraged to attend our next meeting on Wednesday, March 17, at 7:00 p.m. EST by registering here.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality in New York and New Jersey urges all those who agree with this perspective to contact us and get involved in this critical fight.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact