

Kenyon College student workers in Ohio authorize strike over COVID-19 safety

Katy Kinner
15 March 2021

On March 11, members of the Kenyon Student Worker Organizing Committee (K-SWOC) authorized a strike in opposition to the college administration and board of trustees' refusal to recognize the newly formed union.

Students at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio formed K-SWOC in April 2020 in response to employment uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 campus closure in March 2020. According to a press release on the K-SWOC website, most student workers were left in the dark after campus closures, payments stopped and students were told to simply wait for remote employment opportunities. A few workplaces were made remote quickly, but this was not the norm.

A statement on the K-SWOC Twitter announcing the authorization vote noted that they are striking to “protest the college’s unfair practices and policies.” They added, “Over the last year student workers, through KSWOC-UE, have repeatedly attempted to raise our issues with Kenyon’s administration through conversations with managers and senior leadership, petitions that laid out our concerns.”

K-SWOC has not released a date or list of demands for the planned strike which will be made up of student workers from several campus workplaces.

Kenyon College is a small undergraduate liberal arts college attended by 1,730 students and the K-SWOC is not affiliated at this point with any larger union but has cited being assisted by the campus maintenance workers' union, the United Electrical Workers (UE) Local 712. For the 2020-21 academic year, Kenyon is back in session with a mixture of remote and in-person instruction with certain grade levels allowed back on campus for specific semesters.

Since the start of the global pandemic, several student worker issues have come to the attention of the Kenyon

student body and K-SWOC has led several struggles of student workers.

After the campus closure in March, several student groups, including over 250 student workers, organized a petition to push the administration to pay all student workers through the would-be end of the semester in mid-May. The administration agreed to make these payments.

In August 2020, Community Advisors (CAs)—students employed by the college to help manage dormitory life—organized to earn better pay and a better housing subsidy on the verge of a fall semester in which responsibilities and safety were not made clear. In addition, the shortened semester meant CAs—who are paid weekly and given reduced price dorms—would be paying approximately \$3,500 to perform their job responsibilities (not including tuition or food) and be placed in a high-risk environment for contracting COVID-19.

After negotiating with their employers in the Residential Housing department, CAs received a \$1.25 wage increase with an additional \$1,000 housing subsidy, neither of which fully covers housing costs or fairly compensates the students who are being asked to manage dormitories where the spread of COVID-19 is inevitable.

Students with K-SWOC have also noted that COVID-19 has not only caused issues with student employment but magnified existing problems facing student workers such as low wages, lack of job accessibility and job security.

In an effort to become officially recognized by the administration in the fall of 2020, K-SWOC sent a letter to the Kenyon College administration asking the college to “work swiftly to bargain to a first contract” and listed several demands related to better payment

and healthier and safer work environments.

In response, the Kenyon Board of Trustees published a letter on December 11, 2020 denying formal recognition of K-SWOC.

The struggle of Kenyon student workers cannot be separated from the broader struggle of educators, including graduate students, who have organized protests and sickouts across the country in response to the inadequate response of their workplaces and the drive to reopen schools against trusted medical and public health advice.

In September 2020, University of Michigan graduate student instructors went on strike for nine days to demand the universal right to work remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic, improved testing and contact tracing, care subsidies for parents and caregivers, a \$2,500 unconditional emergency grant, rent freezes, and the demilitarization of the university campus.

The work stoppage immediately garnered massive support from undergraduates, lecturers, faculty, staff, university workers and countless supporters around the country.

Immense pressure was exerted on the graduate students from the UM board of trustees dominated by top corporate and financial executives, primarily connected to the Democratic Party, as well as from the American Federation of Teachers, with which Graduate Employees Organization (GEO) is affiliated. The Democrats and the AFT feared that the strike could become a catalyst for a far broader movement of educators against the reopening of schools and colleges. Both the Democratic Party and the AFT fully support the reopening of schools with the goal to return workers to producing profits as quickly as possible.

At Columbia University in New York City, over 3,000 graduate student workers went on strike Monday for better working and living conditions. Last April, they walked out to demand that the administration support students throughout the deadly coronavirus pandemic. The Columbia students, however, face both the opposition of school administration, and the United Auto Workers union, which has spent decades colluding with management to lower the living standards of its members.

The UE is no different. It has a long history of betraying the struggles of the working class, including the sellout of the 2019 strike by 1,700 Wabtec

locomotive workers in Erie, Pennsylvania against deep wage cuts.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) has consistently intervened in the struggles of educators and graduate students, acknowledging their courageous stand while also explaining that they must break the isolation imposed by the corporatist unions and free themselves from the capitalist Democratic Party and its promotion of identity politics. Only in this way can grad student workers expand their struggles beyond the campuses, connecting with teachers, autoworkers and other sections of the working class, and develop the fight for socialism.

We encourage Kenyon student workers to learn from the struggles of students at University of Michigan and Columbia University and appeal not to the trade unions and the Democratic Party, but to the growing struggles of the working class around the world who oppose the bipartisan policy of sacrificing lives to boost the private fortunes of billionaires who have seen their net worth skyrocket amidst the spread of death and contagion across the world.

The IYSSE insists that the struggle facing student workers is not a campus issue, but a much broader political struggle. As such, the fight of student workers cannot be severed from the fight against the pandemic, against the subordination of human life to corporate profit and against the dangers of state repression, fascism and militarism. The demands of student workers can only be advanced on the basis of building a powerful political movement of the working class against capitalism and for socialism.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact