

Columbia University graduate workers speak out on strike

Our reporters
16 March 2021

Since Monday, over 3,000 graduate student workers at Columbia University in the New York City area have been on an indefinite strike, demanding, among other things, higher wages and better health care coverage. The strike comes less than two months after the struggle of 1,400 produce workers at Hunts Point Market in the Bronx for higher wages was sold out by the Teamsters union. The Columbia strike has been blacked out almost entirely by the corporate media, with the *World Socialist Web Site* being the first and—apart from the right-wing *New York Post* and Bloomberg—only outlet to have even reported it as of this writing.

On Tuesday morning WSWS reporters spoke to several striking graduate student workers on the picket line at Columbia University. Daniel and Tanner, both graduate students in the Earth and Environmental Science department, stressed that a living wage and above all better health care coverage are their primary concerns. “I really want to go to a dentist. Dental and vision are not covered by our insurance so I haven’t gotten my teeth done in two years,” Daniel said.

Tanner agreed that the issue of health care was “very pressing.” “Many graduate students, especially those with chronic diseases, are paying huge sums out-of-pocket just to get medical treatment.”

With an annual base salary of between \$26,000 and \$36,000, living in New York City, one of the most expensive cities in the world, is extremely difficult. Any accident, surgery or more complex treatment can quickly drain whatever financial resources the graduate workers have. “I had to get surgery last year,” Daniel recalled, “between the surgery and physical therapy, that was already \$4,000, basically all of my money.”

Tanner added that graduate workers who were working as teaching assistants, like him, easily work

more than the contractually mandated 20 hours per week. Daniel agreed, “There’s a lot of inequality at the university. A lot of people are working very hard and are not getting what they deserve.” Both were disillusioned with the Democratic Party. Tanner said he had voted for Joe Biden, but didn’t expect him to make good on his election promises. Daniel said he was very angry that the Democrats had now “gone to war against the minimum wage.”

Columbia University has taken a hard line on the strike, refusing to offer any concessions to the bargaining committee of the GSW-UAW, even as the union has continuously lowered its demands. Between October and March, the union decreased its demands for a pay raise of 15 percent—\$47,800 for 12-month PhD appointments—to 5 percent—\$43,596. Meanwhile, the university is proposing a zero percent increase from the current salary of \$41,520. The administration has stated it will withhold pay after the disbursement on March 15 and even make graduate workers pay back financial aid awards for the duration of the strike.

Asked whether that had actually happened, graduate workers told the WSWS that the situation was unclear, but that everyone was very anxious. Daniel responded, “We don’t know, but it’s scary. I’m expecting my account to be charged next week.” The university has not made clear how much money it would charge the graduate workers. “We don’t know how much [it will be],” Daniel explained. “But I’m quite sure it’s going to be more than the \$270 strike fund per week that we get from the UAW. Our weekly income [for being a TA] is about \$600 after taxes.”

Evelyn, a second-year graduate student in English and comparative literature, said that her last stipend disbursement was still pending on her account. “It has been pending for longer than usual.” It may be paid out

anyway, she said, “but I have certainly never been anxious about it before. Which probably speaks more to the psychological turmoil” resulting from the university’s retaliation.

Another graduate worker, who asked to remain anonymous, said, “It’s been frustrating to see that Columbia doesn’t address the concerns of graduate students.” She said that protection against discrimination and harassment, and a means of arbitration between faculty members and graduate workers, who usually work for faculty, were a major concern for her, along with compensation and health care. She and her colleague denounced the “shitty, cruel treatment” of students by the university throughout the pandemic.

Like many other universities, Columbia forced students out of the dorms in the spring of 2020, resulting in a serious housing crisis, especially for international students. “Columbia owns most of the buildings that graduate students live in,” the graduate worker added, yet the university has refused to lower rents. Evelyn noted that many of the concerns of graduate students were parallel to those of undergraduates. Over 1,100 Columbia undergraduates have gone on a tuition strike this semester, while the university reported a \$310 million increase to their \$11 billion endowment at the end of 2020.

The issues confronting graduate workers at Columbia are not unique to the university. The attempts by the university administration, whose board is packed with multi-millionaires, to make university workers pay for the crisis mirror the dynamic of the capitalist response to the coronavirus pandemic as a whole. While billionaires like Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk have enriched themselves, including through the multi-trillion-dollar federal bailout of March 2020, workers are forced to work under life-threatening conditions in the midst of a pandemic while seeing their already precarious living standards eroded. The unions, including the UAW, have sought to stifle all working class struggles in opposition to these conditions. At Columbia, they are complicit in isolating a strike that is supported by broad sections of workers.

The WSWS is seeking to mobilize the broadest possible support behind the Columbia graduate student strike. A Connecticut educator, who learned about the strike through the WSWS, expressed her support for the

graduate workers, saying: “A fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work seems to have fallen on deaf ears—or perhaps those living in ivory towers just can’t hear the people at all anymore. The divide between the classes is widening more and more each day. Strikes like this are not only necessary, they are vital as a tool to empower the working class.”

Lisa, a nurse in New York City who is supporting the work of the New York City Educators’ Rank-and-File Safety Committee, said, “We unite with you and ask you to join with us as a fighting unit of teachers, health care and transit workers, and as part of the working class across the US. Columbia has an endowment of \$11 billion and [the UAW has] a strike fund of close to \$800 million. The time has come for your work and study to be rewarded! The contradictions between the financial elite and the working class are irreconcilable. Therefore these are necessary struggles in preparation for even bigger struggles ahead in unity with workers here and around the world. Tune into our meeting and let’s work together.”

The New York City educators rank-and-file committee is meeting on Wednesday, March 17, at 7:00 p.m. EDT. Register [here](#) to attend. 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 the fight for socialism.



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