“This is not just a problem of labor exploitation, but the problem of being able to live at all.”

Striking graduate workers at Columbia University speak out on their struggle

Our reporters
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More than 3,000 graduate student workers at Columbia University in New York City are entering the fourth day of a strike for living wages, expanded health benefits, and job protections. The corporate media has blacked out the strike almost entirely, concerned that it would find support among wider layers of workers who are confronted with very similar issues as the striking graduate workers: lack of health care coverage, a severe housing crisis, and wages that fail to meet the cost of living.

The WSWS spoke to **Joanna,** a Columbia PhD student in modern Chinese literature who is an elected member of the GWC-UAW bargaining committee. Joanna said, “The university is adopting a stance of ‘we refuse to change anything, and we are unfazed by the strike,’ which we take to be a type of posturing,” adding that “we will see an impact and nervousness on the university’s part in the coming days and possibly weeks.”

“There are a lot of aspects of Columbia’s academic mission that cannot be fulfilled without the essentially cheap labor of teaching assistants and research assistants. A strike has the power to cripple the university to the extent that you need to cripple them in order to get your demands met.” Joanna continued, “I believe that we can organize towards a very, very long strike if necessary.”

Joanna spoke about the conditions graduate workers have faced in the past year and the May 2020 rent strike. “Grad workers decided to go on strike in the wake of the pandemic because many graduate workers were put into a situation of almost immediate precarity because, for a vast majority of graduate workers, we actually can’t afford to pay our rent in New York City for 12 months. The math just doesn’t add up for the amount we get for our stipends, especially if you’re a nine-month appointment. Rent is basically around 60 percent of our income per year (for shared apartments).”

For nine-month appointments, which are typical for students in humanities and social sciences, Joanna stated that stipends are around $31,000, sometimes with a summer stipend of $4,000. “Columbia owns the neighborhood and has a captured market of graduate students. A lot of us are international students, so we can’t actually rent from other landlords because we need to have a financial guarantor or a minimum income, but because our stipends are so low, most landlords don’t want to rent to us.”

“This is where the connection to other issues is so important. Columbia buys up property and land, converts a lot of these buildings into graduate student housing, jacks up the prices, therefore driving out other people in the neighborhood because the whole neighborhood becomes more expensive, and then rents them out to grad workers on a measly stipend, saying ‘we are subsidizing housing for you,’ though they base this subsidization on Manhattan rates, as opposed to Harlem’s.

“Essentially, the way we survive is to disappear from the city over the summer. You go to a place with a lower cost of living—for international students, that might be a home country—and sublet our apartments. But that just became impossible during the pandemic.

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So suddenly, we had swathes of people who cannot pay their rent."

"When you can't pay your rent to Columbia, they put it on your student bill and then you can't register for classes if you have outstanding payments. And for international students like myself, having an outstanding payment and not being able to register for classes means that my student status is threatened, and thus my visa status is threatened."

"When you have an employer who is also your landlord and also your degree-granting institution, they have total control over all those things. They no longer have control only over work hours, but they basically have control over all aspects of your life. So that's also why I think there's so much at stake in this fight."

Joanna also brought up the struggles of teachers, nurses and other essential workers, including strikes, throughout the pandemic. "The pandemic has highlighted a kind of crisis—the crisis of capitalism—that is unique because it gets to the issue of a crisis of life itself. This is not only about a problem of labor exploitation; it draws the connection between that and the problem of being able to live at all. I think that these sets of circumstances have led to a lot of these struggles. This kind of collective moment where we're seeing these things come up spontaneously is important for us to think about things broadly and together."

Carolina, a PhD student in the history department, echoed many of these concerns about housing and a wage that is impossible to live on. "I make 30K a year, that's not a living wage" she said. "They [Columbia] own a lot of property and have made lots of money over the last year. They can afford to pay us a living wage. They are a business; they have their priorities: profits."

Pedro, a graduate student worker in architecture research, added**:** "During the summers we teach classes, but this year we didn't have class. So, I didn't get to teach over the summer. I was thinking of going back to Chile. It was complicated because I did stay, but I didn't work, [so] I didn't get any money." He referred to a wave of strikes and protest movements across the Americas, noting, "There are strikes going on everywhere. In Chile, we've had the largest upheavals in 40 years. Since the dictatorship."

Isabella, an undergraduate student at Columbia who supports the striking graduate workers, said: "There was a strike last year too when we were sent home from COVID since they told every grad student they needed to go back home to many different countries that weren't allowing travel. A lot of grad students with visas can't stop working because their visas will be taken, but in the one class with the TA the format of the entire lecture has been changed so that the professor actually does all the work."

Despite an almost complete media blackout, the strike is being followed and supported by graduate and other workers across the country. **Daniel**, a PhD physics student at Yale, told the WSWS, "I support the strikers in their goals for higher wages and improved benefits. Workers need to unite to create a society where power is more horizontally distributed and cannot be acquired undemocratically through the private possession of capital."

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