UAW seeks to isolate Columbia and New York University graduate student struggles

International Youth and Students for Social Equality at New York University
22 March 2021

Graduate student workers at New York University (NYU) will begin voting today on whether to authorize a strike to fight for improved wages and health care, expanded family and child care benefits and other demands. The threat of strike action at NYU comes as over 3,000 graduate students at Columbia University begin the second week of a walkout against their administration's resistance to similar demands.

Graduate workers at both schools are members of unions affiliated to the United Auto Workers (UAW). Rather than uniting the struggles, however, the UAW is doing everything to isolate each section of grad students and subordinate their fight to the union's maneuvers with university executives and the Democratic Party.

This was made clear by the comments of Maida Rosenstein, president of UAW Local 2110—an amalgamated union that has repeatedly negotiated concessionary contracts for workers throughout New York City. Speaking at a Graduate Student Organizing Committee (GSOC) meeting at NYU last week, she explicitly argued against the proposal to coordinate the strikes by NYU students and Columbia students. Rosenstein told student workers they should not be influenced by 'outside factors" in their decision to call a strike.

In what was likely a slip of the tongue, Rosenstein told the GSOC meeting that the Columbia University (CU) strike was, 'I believe, only timed for two weeks.' In fact, the CU strikers never set any end date to their struggle. The functionaries in the UAW, however, plan to run roughshod over the democratic rights of grad students and try to shut down the CU strike even before NYU GSOC concludes its strike vote. This is because an overwhelming strike vote by NYU grad students would bolster the confidence and determination of CU grad students to hold out until they win their demands.

This is not the first time the UAW has shown its real colors at CU and NYU. In 2018, UAW negotiated a secret deal with the Columbia University administration, unbeknownst to the members of the Graduate Workers of Columbia University (GWC-UAW) union, to block any strike action. The three-day sick out in early May of last year, organized by the graduate students at NYU, was actively condemned by the UAW.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) strongly supports the courageous stand taken by striking Columbia graduate students and urges NYU graduate students to vote to authorize strike action. We urge student workers to reject the UAW's sabotage and link up their struggles in a coordinated strike aimed at mobilizing the broadest support in the working class to win their common demands.

The IYSSE urges CU and NYU grad students to form a joint rank-and-file strike committee independently of the UAW to coordinate this fight and appeal to the working class throughout the city to support this critical battle. This committee should issue appeals to transit workers, public school educators and other sections of workers to form their own committees and organize mass demonstrations, joint strikes and other actions to defend the working class against the corporate and political establishment's criminal response to the pandemic and the bipartisan program of austerity and state repression.

Since July of last year, GSOC-UAW, which has over 2,000 graduate workers as members at NYU, has been involved in contract negotiations with the university administration. The previous contract, negotiated by GSOC and the university in 2015, expired on August 31 of last year. For over nine months, GSOC has repeatedly extended the 2015 contract, which includes a no-strike clause.

Meanwhile, just like at Columbia, the university has done nothing but stonewall graduate workers' demands for a living wage, higher stipends, financial compensation

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for hardships that have resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic, proper health care coverage, and expanded family and child care benefits. The graduate students have also called for the protection of international and immigrant workers, and for NYU to cut its ties with the New York Police Department (NYPD).

In response, NYU, a school that rakes in hundreds of millions of dollars annually from undergraduate tuition alone and has an endowment of over $4 billion, is only offering a measly $1 raise. Instead of making $1,600 per month, under NYU's proposed raise, graduate workers would be taking home $1,680 at the end of each month, continuing to receive poverty wages in one of the most expensive cities in the world.

NYU embodies the subordination of academia to private profit and the interests of the corporate-financial oligarchy. For decades, the university has exhibited complete disregard for the well-being of students, staff and faculty, carrying out vicious attacks on workers, subordinating student mental health and food insecurity to profit interests and repeatedly demonstrating utter contempt for the most basic democratic rights. The university's decision to hold in-person classes and work amidst the raging COVID-19 pandemic, which has killed over 30,000 people and infected 794,000 more in New York City alone, was no less dictated by the interests of the millionaire administrators and collection of multimillionaires and billionaires that make up the NYU Board of Trustees.

The result of the university's pseudo-scientific "safety" policies, which accept the inevitability of infection and death, has been over 2,346 COVID-19 infections across NYU's New York City campuses and at least one death. Over the last two weeks, the university has reported over 230 new positive coronavirus cases. These numbers will increase significantly in the coming weeks and months as the university, New York City and the country more broadly, move to fully reopen.

Workers in every country are being forced to return to unsafe workplaces to churn out the profits necessary to pay for the mountains of corporate and government debt resulting from the massive bailouts of the financial markets and corporations. Simultaneously, children are being herded back into contaminated schools to make the back-to-work drive easier for the ruling class. This has resulted in an international death toll of 2.7 million people and over 123 million cases worldwide.

In the US, this "herd immunity" policy has been entirely bipartisan, backed by Republicans and Democrats alike. The Biden administration has proven no less ruthless in its defense of the interests of the American ruling class than its predecessor. His relentless drive to reopen schools and businesses as more lethal strains of COVID-19 spread across the globe; the mass deportation of immigrants and incarceration of immigrant children; the stoking of anti-Asian sentiment in preparation for war with China; the continued bailout of the rich; and the downplaying of the growing threat of fascism are only a few of the many examples of the administration's right-wing character.

While workers die in droves and suffer mass social misery and unemployment, the wealth of the ruling class increases rapidly. These staggering levels of social inequality are incompatible with democratic forms of rule, driving the ruling class towards ever-more authoritarian measures.

The issues that graduate students confront cannot be solved through isolated struggles on campuses. It is critical that grad workers, along with their student, faculty and staff allies link up and broaden their fight into a united struggle across campuses and universities. These struggles must include appeals to K-12 teachers and other education staff, who have been at the forefront of the struggle against the unsafe reopening of schools and the imposition of government austerity.

CU and NYU students should join the network of independent rank-and-file committees of educators that has been set up, with the support of the Socialist Equality Party, in New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, San Diego, Texas, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Tennessee and Alabama.

The growing resistance of the working class must be developed into a conscious political struggle for socialism against the Biden administration and the Democratic Party.

We encourage all graduate workers entering into struggle to join these rank-and-file committees and the IYSSE and to arm themselves with a socialist perspective to address the urgent needs of not only academic workers but of the working class in the US and around the world.

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