

# An Open Letter to Columbia Graduate Students from the IYSSE at University of Michigan

**International Youth and Students for Social Equality at University of Michigan**  
**22 March 2021**

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at University of Michigan express our strong support for the courageous stand taken by striking graduate student workers at Columbia University. The issues being fought for by graduate students—a living wage, job security, better health care coverage and improved working conditions—are the same issues that confront students, young people and workers across the country and around the world.

Like university administrations across the country, no less at University of Michigan, Columbia is run by a collection of multi-millionaire and billionaire hedge fund managers and CEOs with deep ties to Wall Street, Corporate America, the Democratic Party and the military-industrial complex.

In response to the student struggle, the school administration has done everything in its power to demoralize, exhaust and threaten the student workers. They have rejected outright the demands of the Graduate Workers of Columbia University (GWC) in over 65 bargaining sessions. In fact, the administration has gone so far as to create an online daily work-reporting system to identify all workers on strike in order to dock their pay.

There is no doubt that the graduate student workers at Columbia are up against immense political and financial interests. In order to advance the Columbia graduate student struggle, the fundamental political issues need to be clarified.

Just last fall the graduate student strike at the University of Michigan over unsafe working conditions was shut down by the Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO) under the pressure of its parent union, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the Democratic Party-controlled university administration.

The IYSSE at U-M urges Columbia students to draw lessons from this critical experience.

First, the U-M struggle vindicated the perspective of the Socialist Equality Party and IYSSE that a successful struggle of graduate student workers must be based on the principle that all workers, including graduate student workers, have the right to a living wage, quality health care, and safe working conditions, regardless of what university officials and the corporate interests they represent claim is affordable.

The strike at U-M last fall was one of the earliest organized oppositions to the homicidal policy of the ruling class to force the reopening of schools during the pandemic. On September 8, GEO called the strike, demanding, among other things, the universal and unconditional right to work and teach remotely, more personal protective equipment (PPE), increased COVID-19 testing and an

extension of funding and program timeline. The school rejected the demands claiming there was no money to meet these demands while repeating the lie that schools were safe to reopen for in-person learning.

The claim by the universities everywhere that they cannot afford to pay adjuncts and faculty a living wage or lower tuition is absurd. Columbia has an endowment of over \$11 billion. More broadly, over the course of the last year the ruling class has orchestrated a bailout of the rich unprecedented in world history. Since March, more than \$3 trillion has been funneled into Wall Street and corporate America through the US Federal Reserve. US billionaires have increased their wealth by \$1.4 trillion. The issue is not whether or not the resources exist. The real question is which class in society controls these resources and decides how to distribute them?

Second, a successful struggle must be based on the working class, in opposition to both political parties and their functionaries in the trade unions. The conditions facing student-workers cannot be resolved on the campuses. There must be a turn to the working class to mobilize the broad masses of working and young people against the ruling elite and the capitalist system, which subordinates every aspect of life to accumulation of private profit.

During the U-M strike the GEO membership gained enormous support from undergraduate students, faculty and lecturers, construction workers, dining hall workers, as well as workers beyond the campus, including public school teachers and autoworkers. Residential advisors on campus joined the ranks of graduate students and launched a strike as well. Several graduate student unions, including Columbia's, from universities around the country have also issued statements of support.

With momentum building, GEO membership voted to extend the strike by another week.

At this point, the president of American Federation of Teachers-Michigan, David Hecker, intervened and took control over the negotiations. At the same time, the university filed an injunction against the GEO, threatening legal retaliation if the strike continued.

The AFT at U-M did everything in their power to isolate and strangle the strike. Despite having two other unions on campus, the Lecturers Employees' Organization (LEO-AFT Local 6244) and University Physician Assistants at Michigan Medicine (UPAMM-AFT), the AFT refused to mobilize its members in support of the GEO strike or the tens of thousands of K-12 teachers the AFT also claims to represent in Michigan and around the country. The intention was clear: keep the grad student workers at U-M isolated in their struggle.

As for the United Auto Workers (UAW), which has tens of thousands of members in Michigan, it did not even pretend to rally support for the striking GEO workers.

Now the UAW, with which the GWC is affiliated, is seeking to impose the same isolation on the strike at Columbia while it negotiates behind the scenes to make further concessions to the administration. Unsurprisingly, a UAW official at New York University, Maida Rosenstein, explicitly argued against linking up the emerging NYU strike with the one at Columbia.

As any autoworker here in Michigan will attest, the UAW has nothing to do with defending the interest of workers. Over the last four years, the UAW has been integrated into corporate management and functions literally as the paid agents of the auto companies. The last two UAW presidents have been jailed for embezzling union money, as part of a far bigger corruption scheme in which UAW officials were paid company bribes in exchange for signing contracts that destroyed the living standards and working conditions of autoworkers.

That is why we encourage Columbia students to take the conduct of the struggle into your own hands by forming a rank-and-file strike committee, independent of the UAW, to mobilize the broadest support from educators and other sections of the working class in the city and beyond to win your demands.

The strike at U-M would have seen a radically different outcome if it had been expanded to include the widest layers of workers including lecturers, campus workers, workers from the university health care system and schoolteachers. But that would have led to a direct conflict with Governor Gretchen Whitmer and the Democratic Party, which the unions are politically aligned with.

While both corporate-controlled parties defend Wall Street and the capitalist system, they pursue different, but not mutually exclusive, tactics. Trump and large sections of the Republican Party are trying to build a fascist movement to suppress the resistance of workers and to try to crush the growing interest of workers and young people in socialism. Biden and the Democrats promote the corporatist unions and identity politics to block the political radicalization of the working class and divert opposition behind the administration's increasingly bellicose confrontations with China.

The GEO strike in Michigan demonstrates why graduate students must reject all efforts to divide workers by race, gender, ethnicity or any other identity. Even under enormous pressure from the AFT and the threats from the university administration, U-M graduate students wanted to stand their ground and continue the strike; some even called for a general strike to protect workers' lives. After the GEO membership voted to extend the strike, a layer of GEO leaders and other students began to employ racist politics to push through a sellout deal and browbeat those who wanted to defend and expand the strike.

As the IYSSE wrote at the time:

One of their arguments was that continuing the strike would put "black and brown lives at risk." The proponents of this claim did not bother explaining how dropping the fight against the homicidal school openings would protect the lives of students and instructors of any race and nationality. But they were not looking to make any rational argument. Instead, they were trying to intimidate oppositional students with specious accusations of "white privilege" ... in order to protect the deal

the GEO reached with the university to set up a task force on policing, which will involve the so-called Students of Color Liberation Front and GEO.

On this basis, the GEO leaders ended the strike and abandoned the grad students' key demands. A week later, COVID-19 cases erupted on the campus eventually forcing the administration to shut down in-person learning.

Racist politics are the stock-in-trade of the Democratic Party, which has long sought to conceal the class character of society by claiming that equality can be achieved by installing more women and minorities into positions of corporate and political power. Indeed, the Biden administration is a veritable rainbow coalition of Wall Street bankers, war criminals and intelligence agents.

In response to the eruption of the mass, multi-racial and multi-ethnic demonstrations following the police murder of George Floyd last May, the Democrats and their allies claimed that police repression is an expression of the violence of "White America" against "Black America." This was done to conceal the character of the capitalist state—which employs repression to defend the wealth, property and power of the corporate and financial aristocracy—and to block a united movement of the entire working class against the cause of social inequality, racism and war, that is, the capitalist system.

The battles confronting graduate students are inseparable from the broader issues facing all workers and cannot be resolved if they are limited to the campuses. While more than 2.7 million people, including 550,000 in the US, have perished during the pandemic and millions more struggle to survive, the collective wealth of US billionaires has risen by 40 percent, or \$1.1 trillion. Capitalism stands exposed as a historically bankrupt social and economic system. The overthrow of this system and the reconstruction of society on the basis of international cooperation, scientific planning and egalitarianism, requires the mobilization of workers throughout the world on the basis of their common class interests.

The Columbia strike has widespread support among the student workers at the university and schools throughout the country, K–12 educators throughout New York who have been forced back into dangerous schools, and other sections of workers and young people. The struggle at Columbia, moreover, is part of a series of struggles at other universities, including New York University, University of Chicago, Illinois State University, University of Maryland, Indiana University, University of New Mexico and many more campuses.

It is not to the Democrats and the union executives that students should turn, but to teachers, autoworkers, service workers, health care workers, young people and the entire working class. The strike must be expanded and transformed into a conscious political struggle against capitalism.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality calls on striking graduate students to join the Educators Rank-and-File Committee, which is fighting to unify educators and other sections of the working class, and to join the IYSSE to fight for socialism!



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