

Oppose the UAW sellout of the Columbia graduate student strike!

International Youth and Students for Social Equality (US)
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The United Auto Workers (UAW) is conspiring with Columbia University (CU) to shut down the strike of over 3,000 graduate student workers at the university. The union at Columbia University, the Graduate Workers of Columbia University (GWC), has been affiliated with the UAW for two years.

The graduate students have been fighting for a contract ever since the union was established. Their demands include improved wages and health care, expanded family and child care benefits and other demands against what they are calling “COVID austerity measures.”

The UAW has done everything possible to isolate the strike, including preventing the linking up of the strike at Columbia with graduate students at New York University (NYU), who are a part of the same amalgamated union, and are voting on strike authorization this week. The IYSSE has warned that the UAW is preparing to shut down this strike by this weekend, before the NYU strike authorization vote is concluded. These warnings have been confirmed.

At a meeting of the GWC caucus on Thursday afternoon, which included the members of the bargaining committee (BC) and members of the rank-and-file, the bargaining committee revealed that they would be making further concessions to the university. An audio clip, anonymously sent to the WSW, makes clear that the UAW, in collaboration with members of the bargaining committee, is planning to sell out the strike as quickly as possible. The agreement would leave students with a de facto pay cut in the first year, taking into account inflation.

It was only because of fierce opposition to the proposal from graduate students that the plans of the union to end the strike with a sell-out deal were thwarted.

Graduated students fiercely opposed the proposed concessions: “You say that you aren’t going to listen to COVID austerity,” one student declared, “why are you

listening to the university more than you are listening to the unit right now?” Another student said, “We are the ones suffering from COVID austerity. We are not saying [to the bargaining committee] please don’t do this. We demand this. You represent us.” Another: “Are you tyrants? Who are you accountable to? If your unit is telling you no, who else are you taking instructions from?”

As things became more and more heated, a member of the bargaining committee moved to end the meeting without answering any of the questions posed: “We don’t know what we’re doing yet. We have to take a caucus. I’m sorry, we’re going to have to end this meeting.” She cynically added, “Your voice has been heard and umm we’ll get back to you.”

During the meeting, rank-and-file student workers and sections of the BC initiated a petition calling on the BC “to commit to not presenting new proposals.”

The bargaining committee members then signed off of the meeting while being shouted down by members: “No more private meetings!” “Just take a vote!” “So we show up to bargaining and then watch you throw the contract in the toilet.”

Shortly after the call, it was announced that the bargaining meeting would be canceled. A graduate student who attended the meeting told the IYSSE that they had no idea when the next negotiations would be held.

The events of Thursday must be taken as a sharp warning to Columbia graduate students: *The UAW is working to shut down the strike as quickly as possible, behind the backs of the students!* Their efforts have temporarily been thwarted because of overwhelming opposition from the rank-and-file. However, the fight is far from over.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) stands in solidarity with the student

workers who bravely took a stand against the backroom machinations of the UAW and its collaborators in the bargaining committee.

However, the militancy of the rank-and-file will not be enough to resolve the issues involved in this strike. The powerful financial and political interests tied to the UAW and Columbia University will now work all the more feverishly to put an end to the strike with the assistance of the Democratic Party.

The WSWS was told that discussions with elected Democratic Party officials and the DSA to come to the picket line are already underway. These efforts come from a well-known playbook. When the Teamsters moved to shut down the struggle of Hunts Point market workers in January, they called in Democratic Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to sell workers a deal, which left them with a wage “increase” what wouldn’t even adjust for inflation or make up the money they lost with the strike. Dozens of strikers have since been fired.

Students have already taken up the demand for the recall of those members of the bargaining committee with close ties to the UAW who are trying to undemocratically push through concessions. As one student worker exclaimed in Thursday’s Zoom call: “Why should we trust you that our voices are being heard? What evidence or precedent have you ever given us to trust you for a single second that our voices are being heard?” The answer, of course, is none.

This is necessary. But the success of the strike requires above all that it be developed into a broader movement of the entire working class.

Control of the strike cannot be left in the hands of the UAW or its operatives on the bargaining committee. The interests of the UAW are directly tied to the same corporations and political establishment that control Columbia University.

Everything the UAW has done since winning representation of the Columbia students has been aimed at suppressing their struggle. In 2018, the UAW negotiated a secret deal with the Columbia University administration, unbeknownst to the members of the GWC, to block any strike action—the most powerful tool at workers’ disposal—until April 6, 2020. Columbia is again seeking a “no strike” clause for the current contract in negotiation.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality calls on graduate students to form an independent strike committee to expand the strike and mobilize workers throughout New York and beyond.

In order for the strike to move forward it cannot be

isolated. Graduate workers at both CU and NYU are members of UAW Local 2110. 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.

Above all, graduate student workers, at Columbia and beyond, must understand that their strike is implicitly a *political struggle*, which pits the working class against both corporate-controlled political parties and the capitalist system. The struggle for living wages, affordable health care and housing must be developed into a politically conscious effort to mobilize the working class in a counteroffensive against the ruling class’ criminal response to the pandemic, which sacrifices every aspect of life, including life itself, for private profit.

Even as the pandemic has claimed over half a million lives in the US alone, the Democratic administration of Joe Biden has continued the preparations for a catastrophic war against China that were escalated under Trump. Both parties bear direct responsibility for the wave of anti-Asian attacks in the US that have shocked workers internationally.

The social basis for the fight against austerity and imperialist war is the international working class. The past weeks and months have already seen a powerful resurgence of the global class struggle: In Brazil, oil workers have gone on strike against the country’s biggest energy companies. In Germany, airport ground workers are opposing mass sackings and wage theft by the WISAG group. Across the US, teachers are resisting the efforts to reopen schools amidst the deadly pandemic and have formed rank-and-file safety committees. This is the social force that graduate students must turn to in a struggle for socialism.

The IYSSE will do everything to help Columbia graduate students oppose the sell-out of the strike and expand it. Get in touch with us today to make your voice heard! Join the IYSSE and take up the fight for socialism!



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