

“Are you tyrants? Who are you accountable to?”

Columbia graduate students resist efforts to shut down their strike

Our reporters
25 March 2021

Graduate students at Columbia University who have been on strike for almost two weeks are resisting efforts by the union to sell out their struggle. Over 3,000 graduate students are fighting for improved wages and health care, expanded family and child care benefits and other demands against what they are calling “COVID austerity” measures. Their union, the Graduate Workers of Columbia University (GWC), has been affiliated with the UAW for two years.

In a GWC caucus meeting that began at 1:00 p.m. on Thursday and included members of the bargaining committee, as well as members of the rank and file, the bargaining committee revealed a plan to concede wage demands at a bargaining session later in the day. The proposed agreement, on which the rank and file had not been consulted, would leave student workers with a de facto pay cut in the first year, taking into account inflation, according to a source of the WSWS.

The bargaining committee itself is deeply divided. In an audio clip anonymously sent to the WSWS, which only captures the last four minutes of the meeting, rank-and-file members can be heard fiercely opposing the proposal, “Don’t present something that doesn’t represent us because it is embarrassing.”

Another member stated, “You say that you aren’t going to listen to COVID austerity. Why are you listening to the university more than you are listening to the unit right now?”

“We are the ones suffering from COVID austerity,” one member exclaimed. “We are not saying [to the bargaining committee] ‘please don’t [make concessions].’ We demand this. You represent us.”

Another member asked, “Are you tyrants? Who are you accountable to? If your unit is telling you no, who

else are you taking instructions from?”

One member of the bargaining committee, who is clearly trying to force through the proposal, argued back, “We also represent the 90 percent of the unit that is not on this Zoom call as well.”

At this point the meeting erupted with anger from the rank and file. Members could be heard saying, “Well, can you ask them what they want?!” “Can you tell them about the proposal?” “Not a single person has told me that they want this package” “You did not consult the other 90 percent!”

When things calmed down, one rank-and-file member made a proposal. “There is an easy solution! Organize an online tool, open it up to the entire unit, and let’s see the result. I commit, if the entire unit votes for your bad strategy, I will abide by that. Have an online vote! Open to the entire unit! It’s an easy problem to solve. The only reason why you won’t solve the problem is because you want to dictate to us. That’s wrong!”

Various members then spoke in support of the proposal for a vote. “Please answer the proposal [on the vote]. We would really like a direct response from each one of you on that proposal and as to why you are unwilling to consult members of this unit.”

The bargaining committee member who appeared to be leading the attack said, “If Columbia takes the package, it will go to a ratification vote, and we’ll have a vote on it.” One member said, “Saying that the unit can vote up or down on the proposal after it has been agreed to by Columbia is not an answer as to why you cannot get the unit’s opinion on the proposal before you present it to Columbia.”

The same bargaining committee member added, “Part of the problem is that it seems unrealistic that we’ll get

5/4/4 and that a lot of people are uncomfortable striking for that as it is, and we are getting a lot of emails privately [about that].”

At this point the meeting erupted again with rank-and-file members demanding to know why a vote could not be taken. Finally, one member asked, “It is 3:00 p.m. Can you let us know what you are doing?”

A different member of the bargaining committee quickly moved to end the meeting, saying, “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 added, “Your voice has been heard. Umm, we’ll get back to you.”

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.”

In a more pointed comment, one student shouted, “Why should we trust you that our voice is being heard? What evidence or precedent have you ever given us to trust you for a single thing that our voice is being heard?”

Shortly after the call it was announced that the bargaining meeting would be canceled.

There was immense hostility among rank-and-file members, as well as a section of the bargaining committee to the machinations happening behind the scenes over the Columbia strike.

In fact, during the caucus Zoom meeting, rank-and-file student workers and sections of the bargaining committee already began mobilizing for a No vote and initiated a petition calling on the bargaining committee “to commit to not presenting new proposals.”

One graduate worker, who signed the petition, explained to the WSWS, “We weren’t happy with a lot of the concessions being made today. ... I think some of these financial concessions seem especially harmful. We are hoping that the bargaining committee takes into consideration what many of us have requested, which is a vote on some of these issues. ... Although we are normally happy to have the BC speak on our behalf, I think some of what came up today brought about a lot of tension and disagreement. A democratic vote seems like a good step forward.”

Another graduate worker at Columbia told the WSWS afterward, “I can confidently say that the unit is

determined to not only get the university to cave and give us third party arbitration. We are committed to wage increases that would allow graduate workers to actually live.”

Another rank-and-file member who was on the call also confirmed that the lowering of the demands was “not well received,” and that it appeared that the union’s efforts to ram through the deal had been thwarted only because of the students’ opposition. He said, “I’m very much for expanding the strike, fundraising for the strike and continuing outreach to bring more attention to it.” He issued the following call to fellow strikers at Columbia:

Elements of the bargaining committee are asking us to concede to the university's position that graduate students, in withholding their essential labor, have only enough power to be minimally recognized as human. To accept that we can either be paid only slightly more, in a world of rising costs and disappearing opportunities in academia or be granted access to neutral arbitration and seek for ourselves the recourse that injustice demands, but not both. The bargaining committee thinks that the unit does not have the collective will to demand a better life for ourselves and a more just world for workers everywhere, and I would call upon my fellow graduate students to prove them wrong.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact