

# Columbia graduate workers hold the line, set to continue strike into third week

Genevieve Leigh  
26 March 2021

Over 3,000 graduate student workers at Columbia University are gearing up for their third week of an ongoing strike for living wages, expanded health care benefits, family and child care benefits and other demands for improved working and living conditions.

The graduate student workers are up against powerful political and financial interests in the Columbia University administration. They are also in a struggle against elements in their own union, which is affiliated with the United Auto Workers (UAW).

On Thursday, members of the bargaining committee (BC) for the graduate student workers, no doubt under immense pressure from the UAW, presented a new proposal to the bargaining unit in a caucus meeting with significant concessions, just hours before the bargaining session with Columbia. The changes included a de facto pay cut for the first year of the contract. The BC had previously made an explicit promise to the rank and file that they would not make changes to the proposal without consulting membership first. Less than 10 percent of the membership was present at the meeting. The BC attempted to go ahead with the proposal anyway.

It was only because of overwhelming opposition to the proposal from graduate students in attendance that this attempt to push through a sell-out deal was thwarted. The Thursday bargaining session planned with the university was subsequently cancelled at short notice.

In response to the effort, rank-and-file members acted quickly. At the caucus meeting they demanded that an online poll be circulated to the members on the proposed changes and widely discussed before any more moves were made. Under immense pressure, the BC agreed to the poll.

However, at two general membership meetings held

on Friday, the BC made clear they would not release the results of the polls nor commit to being beholden to the results, prompting anger among the membership. Many members of the BC emphasized the need to be “realistic” about what can be accomplished at the bargaining table.

There is no doubt that the news of the BC’s attempt to push through a concessionary proposal has called into question the allegiance of many of its members. In response to the news reported by the WSWS, members of the BC have tried to focus the anger on the issue of “leaks” to the media. At one general meeting they claimed that the leaks had put the negotiations at risk.

However, the real threat to the strike and the interests of graduate students is not the exposure of what is, in fact, happening. On the contrary: the greatest danger facing the strike is its systematic isolation by the UAW, which is aimed at wearing down the strikers, while negotiations are being conducted behind the backs of the rank and file. It speaks volumes about the close connections between the UAW and the billionaire-packed Board of Trustees that the university’s Interim Provost, Ira Katznelson, is a former political strategist for the UAW.

The success of the Columbia graduate workers strike depends, above all, on its widest expansion. This means not only to New York University (NYU) and other university campuses, but to the working class more broadly, which confronts mass unemployment and social misery. The deteriorating conditions facing graduate students are part of the deteriorating conditions of workers across the US and internationally. The social demands and concerns raised by the graduate students speak to workers everywhere.

Columbia students explained their conditions to IYSSE members on Friday at the picket line.

A post-doc at Columbia's Environmental Science department who just finished graduate school explained: "The conditions for teaching assistants are very exploitative. Often they are basically teaching an entire class and they're not being compensated appropriately."

Speaking to the events of the day the student said, "Neutral arbitration is also important. The proposal presented yesterday would have been a cut, taking into account inflation and union dues. I hope that we will hold the line. We have a lot of power, especially when the grading period starts, so I really hope that the strike will continue until then."

One graduate student in the psychology department expressed appreciation for the IYSSE statement, saying, "Your approach to it [the strike] is cool. This situation portrays why capitalism has allowed unions to exist as long as they have. They have their hierarchy and maintain a revenue stream through dues and run counter to workers' interests."

Nevertheless, he insisted that "unions are probably still the best mechanism to improve workers' conditions."

The critical question, the IYSSE member stressed, was to orient the graduate student strike to broader sections of the working class and to expand it. The political situation raises the need not just for a strike but for the building of a political, socialist leadership in the working class for the revolutionary struggles that are ahead.

The immense problems facing workers in the US and around the world will not be solved through organizations like the trade unions, which are tied to the corporations and Democratic Party. Workers require new organizations of struggle. He said he would be happy to read and discuss more, commenting that "the pandemic has been a radicalizing experience."

Two students from the Italian literature department did not want to comment on the caucus meeting the day before, but said, "We can give you a temperature check of our department. We would all like our first contract to not mean a pay cut." They said they were above all concerned with compensation and health care, especially dental coverage, but indicated that "we're also pretty invested in third party arbitration."

One other student noted, "People are nervous that there's going to be too many concessions. Hopefully

the BC won't give in. It's very difficult to bargain with Columbia."

The Columbia strike, despite confronting an almost complete media blackout, has been gaining support from sections of the working class, including educators in New York and around the country who have been fighting for their safety and the safety of their students, in opposition to the ongoing union-led unsafe school reopening campaign.

At a Pennsylvania Educators Rank and File Safety Committee meeting on Thursday, the committee unanimously voted in support of a resolution supporting Columbia graduate students and for an end to the isolation of their struggle.

A lifelong Philadelphia resident at the meeting said, "I think it's important to support the graduate students in New York. They are taking a stand and the UAW is trying to isolate them. Their struggle needs to be supported."

A Philadelphia teacher responded, "Yes, we must support them. Last fall the graduate students at University of Michigan went on strike against the reopening. They were betrayed by the AFT [American Federation of Teachers] and look at what happened. They were right. They shouldn't have opened that school; it became a point of the spread of COVID. The AFT is pushing teachers back into the classroom and it is going to lead to unnecessary deaths and hardships."

Another teacher from eastern Pennsylvania agreed, "We should support workers struggling everywhere."

The IYSSE urges Columbia graduate students to fight for the expansion of their strike into the working class. Get in touch with us today to make your voice heard! Join the IYSSE and take up the fight for socialism!



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**