

Support grows among workers for striking Columbia University graduate students

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Today marks the beginning of the third week of the Columbia University graduate workers strike. The courageous struggle by over 3,000 graduate student-workers for improved wages, benefits and working conditions continues to receive support from workers at Columbia and more broadly throughout the US.

Last Thursday, rank-and-file members of the Graduate Workers of Columbia (GWC), which is affiliated with the UAW, defied an attempt by the union bargaining committee to shut down the strike with a deal that would have signified a de facto pay cut for the graduate students, taking into account inflation and union dues. Now, the university, whose president Lee Bollinger takes home \$4 million every year, is significantly ramping up pressure on the graduate students to force them to give in.

This week marks the first \$0 paychecks sent to strikers since the strike began. One striker posted a photo on social media of his March 31 bi-monthly pay notice, which shows that he will receive \$0. Since the beginning of the strike, Columbia has been asking students to report when their teaching assistants are striking, and has also been noting who is not logging in to the online teaching tools.

Going beyond withholding pay, the university has also begun debiting accounts of striking graduate workers who received lump-sum stipends rather than paychecks. Such fees could jeopardize their status as students, which could in turn affect the visa status of international students.

The Columbia Department of Classics issued a statement March 26 condemning this action in particular, declaring:

The Department of Classics expresses its

dismay at the news that Columbia is not just docking the pay of striking graduate students but also their stipend. By reclaiming stipends that have already been disbursed, whatever the administrative justifications proffered, the university administration is imposing considerable stress and uncertainty on our students, directly impinging on their capacity to conduct research and scholarship. ... In addition, the Department reiterates its gratitude for this academic labour, which fulfils an essential role in allowing the department to carry out its educational mission at Columbia University: the strength of our undergraduate program is directly related to the health of our graduate program and the welfare of our graduates. We condemn the course of action pursued by the university.

Frank Guridy, an Associate Professor of History and African American Studies at Columbia, told the Gothamist that graduate students are underpaid “given the disproportionate amount of teaching that they do, and given that they’re doing it in New York City, where the cost of living constantly goes up.”

While the university is escalating its financial pressure on the striking graduate students, the UAW has continued to systematically isolate the strike at Columbia.

Monday also marks the end of voting on strike authorization by graduate workers at New York University (NYU). Graduate workers at Columbia, members of the Graduate Workers of Columbia (GWC) and at NYU, members of the Graduate Student Organizing Committee (GSOC), are both part of the

same amalgamated local, United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 2110. UAW Local 2110 President Maida Rosenstein has explicitly expressed opposition to having coinciding strikes at Columbia and NYU.

There is immense potential to expand the strike, not just to nearby NYU but among educators in the New York City area and other sections of workers more broadly.

Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, a veteran worker at Ford Chicago Assembly Plant warned the striking Columbia graduate workers about the role of the UAW: “I really do believe it’s true after all these years that the UAW and Ford are in bed with each other. The UAW should always work for their membership, but as we know, they don’t. The members should always be able to vote on any contract. Good luck to the students. I had to fight for everything in my life and I still do every day. Stand tall and do what you believe is right for you.”

A member of the Rank-and-File Safety Committee at the Faurecia Gladstone plant in Columbus, Indiana, told the WSWS, “The graduate students at Columbia University need to tell the UAW, ‘We don’t want you. You are not doing anything for us.’”

“The UAW has been giving away all the rights of the autoworkers,” he continued. “What makes the students think they are going to do them any good? That goes for the IBEW at the Faurecia Gladstone plant. They have taken away our right to strike which is the only way we are going to get anything done. The unions are bending over backwards to give the capitalists what they want. That is why we have to build the network of rank-and-file committees to go against that and stop it period.

“The graduate student-workers at Columbia are being isolated from their brothers and sisters at NYU. They can see that the UAW is doing what is in the best interests of the capitalists. The UAW executives are strangling the strike. We cannot allow them to smother the struggle.

“If the UAW is not going to fight for the students on this matter, they need to break from it and form independent organizations to conduct the struggle. The strikers have to put their foot down. We all do. We have to build the network of rank-and-file committees to prepare a political general strike.”

In addition to powerful statements of support from

autoworkers, educators are also supporting the strike.

A veteran Chicago Public Schools teacher spoke in support of the strike, telling the WSWS: “Ditto to what the IYSSE said!

“Seriously, the grad students should pick smart leaders with super tough skin, vote on them, and that’s their new president. The old useless sell-out ones can bargain all they want. It doesn’t mean anyone is going back to work.

“This is so them. It’s infuriating the thing ALL bargaining groups say, the need to be ‘realistic’ about what can be accomplished at the bargaining table. The same bullshit attitude of ‘be grateful for what they DO agree to.’ Why is it that management gets to be the tough guys?

“The student teachers should expand their strike to include other area schools and also Illinois State.”

Graduate workers at Columbia University and beyond must fight against the efforts by the UAW to shut down the strike, which only failed last week due to significant resistance among rank-and-file strikers themselves. Instead, they must fight to expand the strike, as the Faurecia Gladstone worker proposed.

Moreover, strikers must realize that their strike is implicitly a political struggle. The ruling class is fighting to make the entire working class pay for the pandemic and to force through cuts to education and other social services—in the US and internationally. Join the IYSSE and take up the fight for socialism!

We encourage strikers to participate in the New York City educators rank-and-file committee meeting this Wednesday, March 31, at 7:00 p.m. E D T. Register here.



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