

Columbia graduate worker strike at a crossroads

International Youth and Students for Social Equality (US)
29 March 2021

The strike of over 3,000 Columbia graduate student workers stands at a crossroads.

A bargaining session will take place at 3:30 p.m. today, during which the Graduate Workers of Columbia University (GWC), affiliated with the United Auto Workers (UAW), is set to put forward almost the exact same “package proposal” that was overwhelmingly rejected by the rank-and-file last week.

At a general meeting on Monday evening, the GWC bargaining committee (BC) would not commit to fighting for the demands overwhelmingly advanced by their membership. The proposal GWC-UAW is planning to present today will still include a de facto pay cut in the first year, taking into account inflation and union dues.

In a poll set up by the BC and taken among rank-and-file GWC members over the weekend, one of the top demands graduate workers “need in their contract” was a 5 percent/4 percent/4 percent compensation rate for three years of the contract, yet the BC has ignored this entirely and is proposing the same 3/4/5 deal that was shouted down last week.

The only change to the previous proposal would be adding dental coverage. However, there is little question that the BC is prepared to drop that demand too, just as they have watered down and conceded on many demands by graduate workers even before the strike began. Adopting the rhetoric of trained union officials, they tried to convince the membership that some of their demands were not “winnable” and that they had to be “realistic.”

The BC’s position was met with an outpouring of anger by graduate students who remain determined to fight. In the same poll, the overwhelming majority of students voted in favor of continuing the strike. This is despite the fact that the university is now trying to starve graduate students into submission by withholding pay, while the union is systematically isolating the strike.

The International Youth and Students for Social

Equality urges students to reject efforts by the GWC bargaining committee to capitulate to the pathetic proposals of the university. The demands of the student workers must be based not on what the university falsely claims is “affordable,” but on what is necessary to protect the lives and well-being of the workers.

The insistence that there is no money to meet the already very limited demands being put forward by GWC is a blatant lie. Columbia University is the biggest private landowner in New York City, one of the most expensive cities in the world. Its administration is run by a collection of multi-millionaire and billionaire hedge fund managers and CEOs with deep ties to Wall Street, the Democratic Party and the military-industrial complex. Lee Bollinger, the university’s president, has a salary of \$4.6 million.

Rather, the university, acting at the behest of the ruling class more broadly, is determined to smother the strike to discourage other struggles by graduate students and the working class as a whole.

Over the past year, the global COVID-19 pandemic has been allowed to spread throughout the population, killing over half a million people in the US alone. The ruling class responded to this crisis not by allocating resources to meet human need, but rather by organizing a historically unprecedented bailout of the rich.

Trillions of dollars were made available to Wall Street and major corporations through the nearly unanimous vote of both Democrats and Republicans for the so-called CARES Act, adopted last March. As a result, billionaires in the US alone have increased their wealth by \$1.4 trillion.

The socioeconomic ramifications of the capitalist response to the pandemic are now being felt everywhere. The capitalists are determined to impose ferocious austerity measures on workers, including education workers, in order to pay back the trillions of dollars that were handed over to the corporations. This includes a

complete restructuring of higher education, at the expense of students, adjuncts, professors and staff, to further benefit the rich. Graduate student workers, who were already living on the brink, have been thrown into dire straits.

One point that should be underscored: the ultimate outcome of increased austerity measures on graduate student workers will be the further restriction of higher education to only the richest in society who can afford to be paid poverty wages for years on end. In this sense, the fight by graduate workers is not only for their own conditions, but for the right to education for the working class.

It is precisely because so much is at stake in this strike that the ruling class, Columbia University and the UAW are determined to isolate and defeat it. The strike has been virtually entirely blacked out by the media. Students have indicated that the *New York Times* spoke to strikers at the picket line but then decided to “pull” the story.

The ruling class is keenly aware that the Columbia University strike will set the tone for the many other graduate struggles on the horizon, especially the upcoming strike at New York University, which is being deliberately postponed until the Columbia strike is wrapped up to avoid a linking up of the struggles.

The machinations and maneuvers of Columbia and their operatives in the UAW reflect, above all, an immense fear on the part of the ruling class. The ruling elite is terrified of a broader movement in the working class that threatens to break out into a struggle against austerity measures, deteriorating working conditions, and, ultimately against capitalism and for socialism.

Their fear is wholly justified. The pandemic and the capitalist response to it have created explosive social conditions internationally. Strikes are growing in Brazil, Europe and the US, and workers in auto and education have begun forming rank-and-file safety committees to fight for their interests.

The experience of the past year has demonstrated that the fundamental division in capitalist society is class, not race, gender or nationality. The turn must be to mobilizing the working class in a common struggle against the capitalist system.

Already workers across the US are rallying their support. Through the WSWS, autoworkers in Michigan have expressed their support for the Columbia University graduate students and warned of a UAW betrayal. Educators throughout the West Coast and in Chicago have called for unity with striking Columbia University

graduate students.

A nurse in New York City issued this call:

I am a low paid nurse in New York City and a member of the NYC Rank-and-File Safety Committee. The unions are attempting to blow smoke and fog in the path for the interests of the wealthy owners of Columbia. Broadening your strike to include other university workers in NYC, and turning to the working class here and around the world, outside the unions, is where your strength lies. The ruling class made up of Wall Street executives and Columbia University with their \$11 billion endowment say, “Study and work hard and we will reward you.” That this is a lie is now clearly being shown. In fact, by turning to the working class which is the majority and the strength in this struggle, our united rewards will come. Carry on!

In order to succeed, the demands of graduate students for living wages, affordable health care and other benefits must be developed into a political effort to mobilize the broadest section of workers in a counteroffensive against capitalism, which sacrifices every aspect of life, including life itself, for private profit.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality calls on Columbia graduate students to form an independent strike committee to expand the strike and mobilize workers throughout New York and beyond. Reach out to the IYSSE to discuss this perspective, and join the New York City educators rank-and-file committee meeting this Wednesday, March 31, at 7:00 p.m. EDT.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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