

Columbia University to striking graduate workers: Starve or take our deal

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The Columbia University graduate workers strike, now well into its third week, pits graduate student-workers against the wealthy Ivy League university and the political and financial interests it represents.

At the latest bargaining session Tuesday, the administration rejected the Graduate Workers of Columbia (GWC) proposal, which made significant concessions to the university, essentially out of hand.

The lead Columbia negotiator, lawyer Bernie Plum, estimated that the GWC proposal is “significantly more than \$30 million apart” from what Columbia has decided they are willing to spend. He insisted that the GWC select a handful of “priorities” and promised graduate students they would not get all of the already limited demands for which they are striking.

Rank-and-file graduate workers have demonstrated immense courage and militancy in their strike for better wages, benefits and working conditions, even as their own bargaining committee has maneuvered behind their backs.

The entire experience of the Columbia graduate students up to this point in their struggle with the administration underscores the need for the workers to adopt a political and socialist strategy to advance their struggle.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has previously shown, the Columbia Board of Trustees amounts to a collection of multi-millionaire and billionaire hedge fund managers and CEOs with deep ties to Wall Street, corporate America, the Democratic Party and the military-industrial complex. In many cases, these are the very figures who make up the ruling class in the United States (among them are TOMS Capital CEO Noam Gottesman and former Secretary of Homeland Security Jeh Johnson).

Their attitude toward workers can be summed up by the very fact that they have chosen to dock strikers’ pay in the middle of a pandemic.

There is no doubt that the Board of Trustees at Columbia University is in regular discussions with other Boards of Trustees at schools across the country. This conglomerate of well-connected millionaires have agreed upon a minimal bar

for working conditions for graduate students. They are well aware that a successful strike at one campus would prompt more strikes at others. In fact, those bargaining on behalf of the university implicitly referenced this at Tuesday’s session, saying that compared to other universities, Columbia’s wages and benefits proposal is “not under-market.”

Far from being an argument for graduate workers to accept Columbia’s proposals, the very fact that the proposed starvation wages at Columbia are within the normal range of the graduate labor “market” is only a further indictment of the exploitative character of higher education at large.

Notably, the GWC bargaining committee (BC) used this same tactic to try to tamp down expectations among the rank and file. At a general body meeting Monday, BC members pointed to the sell-out contracts pushed through by the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU)—which has forced its members into unsafe in-person work environments—and the Teamsters union at Hunts Point—which failed to win even the meager demand of a \$1/hour raise—as “examples of strikes winning.”

As the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) warned would happen, the GWC used this argument to justify their plans to put forward their concessionary proposal on Tuesday. It should be noted that this proposal was roundly rejected by members at general body meetings and in a poll taken over the weekend, which revealed immense support for the strike and its demands among the rank and file.

The argument being made by Columbia is based on one simple lie repeated ad nauseam by every employer, in every strike: there is not enough money to provide workers decent wages and benefits. With an endowment of \$11 billion and a Board of Trustees made up of millionaires and billionaires, graduate students should reject this assertion with the contempt it deserves.

Even more contemptible is the university’s attempt to portray strikers as selfish for demanding raises while Columbia staff have suffered a pay and hiring freeze during

the pandemic.

The fierce opposition that workers face from Columbia is bound up not only with their own “bottom line,” but with the needs of the ruling class more broadly, which is determined to smother any opposition that emerges in the working class.

The ruling elite, Democratic and Republican alike, is terrified of the seething anger among workers as they seek to implement further austerity in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis. They know that any opposition has the potential to spark a mass movement of workers across industries who are fighting for the very same demands.

Over the past year, both big business parties organized a historically unprecedented bailout of the rich, while leaving workers to fend for themselves. Trillions of dollars were made available to Wall Street and major corporations through the nearly unanimous vote of both Democrats and Republicans for the CARES Act last March.

Having taken measures necessary to secure its wealth, the ruling class immediately began its back-to-work campaign and then its back-to-school campaign. As a result, billionaires in the US alone have increased their wealth by \$1.4 trillion in the past year.

Now 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. Their plan necessitates a complete restructuring of class relations, including in higher education, at the expense of students, adjuncts, professors and staff, to further benefit the rich.

The strike at Columbia involves fundamental questions for the working class—the right to a living wage, the right to high quality health care and child care, access to higher education—among others. However, these questions cannot be resolved within the university alone.

In the same way that Columbia University has a strategy which extends well beyond the walls of the campus, workers must understand that the issues involved in their struggle are mass issues that require the intervention of the working class throughout the country, and indeed internationally.

What is involved is a fight against an entire social and economic system—capitalism—which subordinates social need to private profit and the accumulation of wealth by the rich.

The fundamental question in this strike, as in all workers’ struggles, remains: who controls the resources in society? The ruling class, represented in part by the Board of Trustees, or the working class?

At every general body meeting, a great deal of effort is made to talk about “bargaining strength” and “building power.” However, the real strength that remains untapped in

the Columbia struggle lies within the working class. Every effort must be made to expand the strike to other universities where dozens of graduate struggles are brewing.

Appeals must be issued to adjuncts, faculty and other school staff at universities across New York City—including at New York University (NYU), where graduate workers are voting on strike action—and more broadly to K-12 teachers and educators who have been on the front lines of the fight against a premature return to in-person learning.

Above all, graduate students must reject the entire framework being imposed by Columbia and the United Auto Workers (UAW), with which the GWC is affiliated. The UAW has done everything possible to isolate the strike, including preventing the linking up of the strike at Columbia with graduate students at NYU, who are a part of the same amalgamated UAW Local 2110. They have not called out Columbia postdoctoral workers, who are also UAW members with whom the university negotiated a contract in July 2020, or the tens of thousands of autoworkers across the US suffering terrible working conditions.

It speaks volumes about the close connections between the UAW and the university that the university’s interim provost, Ira Katznelson, is a former political strategist for the UAW.

Every section of workers and young people has a stake in the struggle at Columbia. 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.

Columbia graduate workers are fighting not only for their own conditions and for graduate workers everywhere, but for the right of the working class to higher education.

We encourage strikers to participate in the New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee meeting this Wednesday, March 31, at 7 p.m. EDT. Register here .



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