

What is behind the media blackout of the Columbia graduate workers strike?

Genevieve Leigh
31 March 2021

Over 3,000 Columbia University (CU) graduate student workers have been striking for almost three weeks for increased wages, better health care coverage, expanded family and child care benefits and other demands against what they are calling “COVID austerity measures.”

Despite the enormous significance of the strike, it has received almost a total media blackout.

Not a single article has appeared in any of the mainstream media outlets, including the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Washington Post*. In fact, students have indicated that the *New York Times* spoke to strikers at the picket line but then decided to “pull” the story. *Bloomberg* and the *New York Post* have each produced a single article on the strike.

As for the so-called “left” publications, *Jacobin* has mustered just one article, now almost two weeks old. The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) publication, *Democratic Left*, has remained silent.

What accounts for the media blackout? When rank-and-file members of the Graduate Workers of Columbia (GWC) asked their union representatives about the blackout, the leadership responded by saying that the media had more important things to report on. This lie obscures the much more fundamental political and financial issues involved.

First, the media blackout is a deliberate decision made at the highest levels of the mainstream media outlets and done at the behest of the University’s well-connected Board of Trustees (BoT). The BoT is tied by a thousand strings to all the major media outlets and political pundits.

Claire Shipman, vice chair of the board, is a pillar of the mainstream corporate media world. She worked for ABC News for 15 years, reporting mostly on politics and international affairs. Before moving to ABC, she covered the White House and the Clinton administration for NBC News. Shipman also spent a decade at CNN, where she covered the White House and spent five years at CNN’s Moscow bureau covering the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

She is married to Jay Carney, former White House press secretary under Obama (2011-14) and director of communications for Vice President Joe Biden from 2008 to

2011. Carney has been the senior vice president of global corporate affairs at Amazon since March 2, 2015, where he oversees public policy and public relations for the notorious corporate giant around the world, reporting directly to Amazon founder Jeff Bezos.

CU President Lee Bollinger is a director of Graham Holdings Company, formerly The Washington Post Company, which owned the *Washington Post* until 2013, when it was sold to Amazon’s Jeff Bezos.

One could cite many more examples. There are not only countless high level media connections on the board of trustees but also deep political connections which could easily be leveraged for the same purposes.

However, there are more fundamental political considerations behind the media blackout than the individual financial or public relations interests of the university and the BoT.

The outcome of the strike at Columbia will set a precedent for the many graduate, adjunct and faculty struggles brewing across the country, including at New York University, Illinois State University, University of Maryland, Brown University, Kenyon College and many others. Those working on behalf of CU at Tuesday’s bargaining session explicitly stated that, compared to other universities, Columbia’s wages and benefits proposal is “not under-market.”

Undoubtedly, the millionaires and billionaires on the Board of Trustees at Columbia University are in regular discussions with other well-connected boards of trustees at schools across the country to determine the “market” poverty wage they aim to implement nationwide. The fierce opposition that workers face from these universities is bound up not only with their own “bottom line” but with the needs of the ruling class more broadly.

The Democratic and Republican parties are determined to smother any opposition that emerges in the working class in order to preserve their wealth and the capitalist system that extracts this wealth through the exploitation of the working class.

The ruling class is acutely aware that social conditions in the US are explosive. There is immense anger brewing among workers as they are left to fend for themselves while the billionaires continue to rake in record profits, including over

\$1.4 trillion over the past year alone.

In order to pay back the trillions of dollars which have been handed over to the corporations during the pandemic, ferocious austerity measures are being imposed on workers in every industry. For higher education workers, the results of these austerity measures have been devastating. Colleges and universities across the country have cut a total of 650,000 jobs since February 2020, a 13 percent reduction of all higher education workers.

Despite these dire conditions, the Biden administration has made clear through its first two months in office that it will not veer in any fundamental way from the policies of the Trump administration in regard to the pandemic. Biden has directly stated that the central aim of the drive to reopen schools—which takes place as more infectious and deadly variants spread uncontrolled and before the population is fully vaccinated—is to get parents back into workplaces, where they will generate profits for the major corporations.

Likewise, his administration has already acted on longstanding plans to escalate preparations for a catastrophic war against China, a campaign which has resulted in a wave of anti-Asian attacks across the country that have shocked workers internationally.

There is immense hostility among workers to the policies of the ruling class, Democratic and Republican alike. Under these conditions, every struggle of workers has the potential to set off a much broader eruption of class struggles, which would of necessity require a break from the two main bourgeois parties and their functionaries in the trade union bureaucracies.

These are the political considerations motivating the silence over the Columbia University graduate workers strike. If and when the university and union leadership can get a handle on the negotiations, it is likely that the media freeze will be carefully lifted in order to pressure students to accept a sellout deal.

The silence from the so-called “left” organizations like the DSA and their co-thinkers at *Jacobin* is highly significant but should come as no surprise. The DSA and *Jacobin* serve an important political function in promoting the illusion that the Democratic Party and the unions can be transformed into organizations that will fight for reforms and even socialism.

However, the reality is that these organizations cannot be reformed. The Democratic Party is one of the oldest capitalist political parties in the world, and the unions long ago ceased to be working class organizations. The DSA and other pseudo-left groups insist on the hegemony of the unions precisely because they oppose the emergence of a genuinely independent movement of the working class and because they themselves aspire to occupy lucrative positions in the union apparatus.

When these organizations do intervene in struggles, it is always in order to support the union bureaucracies. Their role as cheerleaders to the Democratic Party was most explicitly on display at the start of 2021, when the Teamsters union worked

to force through a sellout contract to end a six-day strike by 1,400 workers at the Hunts Point produce market in the Bronx in New York City.

Workers had struck for a modest \$1 per hour raise per year. As a result of the sellout, they were left with an average annual wage increase of 62 cents an hour more for new hires and 40 cents an hour for veteran workers over the next three years. Most of the wage increase, moreover, is offset by reductions in their health care benefits. Despite this abject betrayal by the Teamsters, *Jacobin* proclaimed the Hunts Point strike a victory.

The GWC specifically cited this experience as an example of a “strike winning” in a presentation to their membership at a general meeting on Tuesday.

The silence from pseudo-left groups like the DSA is, above all, a sign of the nervousness that these layers feel over their inability to contain opposition from below, which has been on full display since the strike began.

It is also worth noting that the silence over the strike comes as the DSA poster child for the organization’s strategy of reforming the Democratic Party, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, has been thoroughly exposed in a recent interview with the DSA’s magazine *Democratic Left*. The analysis of the interview by the WSWs has gone viral, prompting a firestorm of opposition among her supporters.

The striking Columbia graduate workers must not wait for support from the mainstream media or various “left” bourgeois politicians, all of whom are hostile to the interests of the striking workers. Rather, they must form their own rank-and-file strike committee, in order to wage a determined struggle against whatever miserable deal the UAW seeks to impose. This committee must actively turn out to the broader working class and fight to expand their struggle as widely as possible.

Despite the media blackout, the Columbia graduate workers strike has garnered wide support from other students, graduate workers, and other workers throughout the country and globally. Powerful statements from students, autoworkers, and educators have poured in each day, which have been published nearly every day on the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (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 voices heard and discuss how to form a rank-and-file strike committee! Join the IYSSE and take up the fight for socialism!



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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