

Columbia University grad workers must form a rank-and-file committee to spread their strike!

New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
31 March 2021

There is a pressing need for all educators in New York City to form rank-and-file committees independently of the trade unions in order to take up a political and industrial struggle to defend education, public health, and fight for decent living standards.

The ongoing strike of over 3,000 Columbia University graduate student workers is now in its third week. In the last several days, the leadership of the Graduate Workers of Columbia (GWC), affiliated with United Auto Workers (UAW), has lowered its modest demands to the point where graduate workers would take a de facto pay cut with only a three percent raise in the first year of the contract, followed by a four percent raise for the second and five percent for the third year.

This proposal has been rejected by the rank-and-file but is nevertheless still being advanced by the GWC-UAW bargaining committee.

In an effort to avert having two university strikes in the same city, the UAW has systematically sought to isolate the Columbia strike from even a potential strike at New York University, where graduate workers are organized in the same local and are still voting on a strike authorization.

Columbia University, for its part, claims that it has no money to provide these workers with a living wage in one of the most expensive cities in the world. The university is run by some of the wealthiest people in the United States, has an endowment of \$11 billion, and pays its president Lee Bollinger a salary of \$4.3 million a year.

In other words, the forces arrayed at Columbia are a microcosm of American society: on the one side are workers, living in uncertainty and on the edge of poverty, while on the other are a small class of the super-affluent with the closest ties to Wall Street, the military-intelligence apparatus, and the capitalist political parties. In this struggle, the UAW and the trade unions—themselves a critical component of the Democratic Party—stand on the side of the employers and operate as a fifth column among strikers

working to betray their struggle.

This is a situation every K-12 educator in New York City has experienced firsthand. Wall Street has demanded that the schools open during a pandemic in order to send parents back into unsafe workplaces to churn out profits. In New York, this has been implemented by Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio and Governor Andrew Cuomo, as part of the broader reopening campaign of both the Trump and Biden administrations.

After closing schools and some nonessential businesses in March 2020 under the threat of sickouts and job actions, especially by New York City public school teachers, by August there was a systematic effort underway to reopen the schools. When the first wave of reopenings led to a surge of the pandemic and the citywide test positivity rate surpassed three percent, de Blasio was forced to close the schools.

In a matter of days, de Blasio unilaterally reopened primary schools on December 7, then middle schools on February 25, and high schools on March 22. This was done with no regard for the health of the population, educators or students, and has led to over 20,000 COVID-19 infections among students and staff throughout the city.

The reopening effort was accompanied by a massive propaganda campaign in the media, led by the *New York Times*, to portray school buildings as safe and COVID-19 transmission rates among children as low, while vilifying educators as lazy. The schools as well as other non-essential businesses have, in fact, been opened despite the clear evidence that they are vectors for the spread of the virus.

Who played the role of the UAW in this scenario? Who spoke in the name of educators, but acted in the interests of the ruling class? Tens of thousands of New York City educators would correctly point to the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) and its president Michael Mulgrew, who at every point echoed the official line of the de Blasio administration and jettisoned any standards for the closing of the schools. Mulgrew and the UFT notoriously backed down

in November from an agreement with the city that schools would be closed when the citywide positivity rate rose above three percent. The UFT, in short, opened the schools during a raging pandemic and is fighting to keep them open.

This is no accident. The UFT is the same type of organization as the UAW, not a union as the term is commonly understood, but a corporatist entity that seeks to divide and isolate workers and politically subordinate them to the Democratic Party. For this, the union bureaucrats are rewarded with perks and salaries of hundreds of thousands of dollars a year.

The Columbia strike and the reopening of schools and non-essential businesses coincide with a fourth wave of the pandemic, which threatens to infect tens of thousands and kill thousands more workers throughout the region. The citywide test positivity rate has hovered at around seven percent and higher in many working-class neighborhoods for the past few weeks. Experts, however, warn that the spread of more infectious and deadly variants of COVID-19, which now account for over 51 percent of new cases, will invariably lead to a substantial uptick in infections and deaths before the majority of the population is vaccinated.

What is the way forward? The working class must be armed with a perspective that identifies its allies and enemies. Its allies are workers everywhere, who will help and sacrifice for their brothers and sisters as soon as they understand the need. The enemies are Wall Street, its Democratic and Republican Parties, and the unions. Columbia grad workers and K-12 educators alike must break free from the domination of these pro-capitalist entities.

Only with new organizations can educators fight for decent living standards, in defense of the right to free and high-quality education for everyone, and for the right to health and safety.

We founded the New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee as part of a network of committees across the US and globally, from the West Coast to Chicago, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Texas, and other cities and states, along with logistics workers and autoworkers, to create genuine fighting organizations opposed to the big business parties and the so-called unions. The working class is engaged in a global struggle against a common enemy and educators, healthcare workers, bus drivers and students have formed committees of action in Australia, Britain, Germany, Turkey, Canada and Sri Lanka.

To expand their strike, Columbia University grad strikers must follow suit and build their own, independent rank-and-file strike committee. Their demands must be dictated by their needs, not what the university says it can afford. The UAW will do everything in its power to stifle this independent organization because it threatens their

bureaucracy's material interests.

New York's K-12 educators, as well as working-class parents and youth, should join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to rally support for the Columbia strikers and to help them break the isolation imposed by the UAW.

This action must be a part of a broad front of transit workers, city workers, Amazon workers and gig economy workers in the area.

The New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee calls for a general strike to fight for the following program:

- For a 30 percent wage increase and full healthcare benefits for striking Columbia University grad student workers!
- Close schools and non-essential businesses until the majority of the population is vaccinated!
- Provide full income support for parents while they stay at home with their children!
- Hire thousands of educators and full funding for adequate computer equipment and infrastructure to facilitate remote learning!
- Give full income support for non-essential workers., the unemployed, and small businesspeople to enable them to stay home safely to contain the pandemic!
- Hire thousands of healthcare workers and the expand medical facilities, including vaccination centers!
- Implement the best safety conditions for essential workers, including logistics and transit workers, to be determined by their own rank-and-file safety committees!

We urge all New York City educators, including Columbia grad workers, to join and build this committee today.



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