

UAW isolates Columbia University strike, starves graduate students with poverty strike pay

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Columbia University (CU) graduate student workers are now in the third week of their strike for increased wages, child care benefits, health benefits and against what they are calling “COVID-19 austerity measures.” Negotiations continue between the university and the Graduate Workers of Columbia (GWC), which has been affiliated with the United Auto Workers (UAW) for two years.

The university has implemented ruthless measures against the striking workers, including docking strikers’ meager pay in the middle of a pandemic. It is actively attempting to starve the workers, essentially using economic blackmail to force them to accept a concessionary contract.

A Columbia grad student might expect that the UAW, which has a \$790 million strike fund, would be in a strong position to assist the workers financially. However, the UAW is operating with a deliberate strategy to defeat the strike, while keeping its very existence hidden from autoworkers it falsely claims to represent.

The UAW strike fund: A bonanza for executives

Despite its enormous resources, the UAW has isolated the striking graduate students and granted the workers a measly \$275 a week in strike pay. This is a starvation wage for any worker, let alone those who live in New York City, one of the most expensive cities in the world. The average rent for a two-bedroom apartment is \$3,798 a month, which no graduate student could afford with their wages and stipends.

For a graduate student who is able to secure one of the coveted CU subsidized apartments, costing around \$1,300 a month, the UAW “assistance” would not even cover a month’s worth of rent, let alone food, health care, child care, transportation, bills, student loans and other costs of living.

The UAW has offered no justification for the miserably low pay, but it is completely in line with the strike pay offered to autoworkers on the incredibly rare occasion that the UAW

cannot prevent a strike from breaking out. In 2019, during the first major national auto strike since 1976, over 46,000 GM workers walked out on strike across 10 states. The UAW paid workers only \$250 a week. At the time, they were sitting on a strike fund worth over \$800 million.

The UAW is not a workers organization. It is an arm of corporate management and a labor police force, controlled by wealthy executives who subsist on the exploitation of the workers they claim to represent.

Even as the auto industries were disrupted and closed for long periods of time throughout last year because of the pandemic, the UAW’s net income increased by \$12.7 million, up \$1.2 million from the previous year. During this time, many union members survived on unemployment without any additional pay from the UAW.

The total assets of the UAW at the end of the latest reporting period amount to a staggering \$1,127,664,164.

The UAW could provide each of the 3,000 striking graduate workers \$1,000 a week for a monthlong strike and still have \$778 million left over in its strike fund. In fact, a \$1,000 stipend every week for one month to every graduate student would account for just over 1.5 percent of the total strike fund.

Even though virtually the entire UAW leadership was indicted in a racketeering scheme over the last several years, guilty of stealing workers’ dues money and taking bribes from the companies, the UAW remains a gravy train for the corrupt bureaucracy. Through union-management slush funds, stock holdings of the Big Three companies, and multibillion-dollar VEBA health care trust funds, the UAW has become a business in its own right.

The total annual salary payments for the UAW national staff in 2020 reached a staggering \$77,407,948! Meanwhile, the total spent on strike benefits was \$6.1 million.

UAW President Rory Gamble receives a salary of approximately \$4,615 per week. According to the latest Labor Department filing (March 31, 2021), the salaries for the top 14 officials at the UAW national headquarters totaled \$3,027,994.

As these figures clearly demonstrate, graduate workers should be under no illusion that the UAW does not have the money to

provide real assistance. The hundreds of millions of dollars in the UAW strike fund is money that comes directly from contributions made by workers.

The UAW executives are well aware that the poverty strike pay places the striking workers in a financial situation that will become increasingly desperate with each passing day. Already, many strikers who want to continue striking have spoken out on the dire situations they face. It is no secret that Columbia University is counting on the economic distress facing workers to force them to accept another concessionary contract.

The isolation of the Columbia strike

In addition to the immense financial resources available to the UAW, the apparatus also “represents” over 400,000 active members and more than 580,000 retired members in the United States, Canada and Puerto Rico. There are more than 600 local unions in the union.

Why has the UAW not called out other locals in support of the Columbia workers?

Many graduate students no doubt supported the UAW unionization efforts under the impression that the graduate workers would have the backing of autoworkers in their struggle against Columbia University. But the UAW has made clear, as it does in every strike, that it has no intention of mobilizing the industrial workers behind the students, or even other UAW members on their own campus or neighboring campuses.

Autoworkers would support the striking graduate students, but the UAW is doing whatever it can to prevent workers from even knowing that the strike is taking place. There is, for example, no mention of the Columbia strike on the UAW’s website.

It is an extraordinary exposure of the union’s treachery, the UAW is actively seeking to separate the graduate workers struggle at Columbia from the graduate workers struggle at New York University (NYU), who are part of the same amalgamated UAW Local 2110!

UAW Local 2110 President Maida Rosenstein, speaking at a Graduate Student Organizing Committee (GSOC) meeting at New York University in the second week of the strike, explicitly argued against the proposal to coordinate the strikes by NYU students and Columbia students. Rosenstein told student workers they should not be influenced by “outside factors” in their decision to call a strike.

When the union’s attempt to shut down the Columbia strike was thwarted by the rank and file at the end of its second week, the NYU body “suddenly” decided to expand its strike authorization vote by another full week. Clearly, the UAW and the universities are doing everything in their power to prevent a

situation where the two strikes coincide.

In its bid for union representation, the UAW sold itself to graduate student workers as an organization that defends the interests of tens of thousands of dues-paying members. In reality, it functions as a tool of the very corporations it claims to fight against.

As the WSWWS has previously reported, it speaks volumes about the close connections between the union and Columbia that the university’s interim provost, Ira Katznelson, is a former political strategist for the UAW.

The UAW and the other unions in the AFL-CIO long ago ceased to be workers organizations. They are, instead, instruments for the suppression of the class struggle. Over the past year, amidst mass death and social misery produced by the ruling class response to the pandemic, the unions have done everything they could to prevent the emergence of mass working class opposition.

In order for the Columbia strike to move forward, control cannot be left in the hands of the UAW, whose interests are directly tied to the same corporations and political establishment that control Columbia University.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality urges students to form independent strike committees to expand the strike as broadly as possible!

Send delegations to workplaces and factories in New York and beyond to explain your struggle to autoworkers, teachers, transit workers, hospital workers, retail workers and other sections of the working class.

Every section of workers and young people has a stake in the struggle at Columbia. Like all sections of workers, they are all fighting against “COVID-19 austerity,” that is, the implementation of ferocious austerity measures against the working class to pay back the trillions of dollars that the Democrats and Republicans handed over to corporate America and Wall Street at the start of the pandemic.

If the struggle at Columbia University is to succeed, it must develop into a broader industrial and political mobilization of the entire working class. This will not happen through, but must be independent of, the corrupt apparatus that is the United Auto Workers.



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