

Columbia University graduate students: Reject UAW efforts to shut down strike!

International Youth and Students for Social Equality
5 April 2021

The IYSSE at NYU is hosting an online meeting this Thursday at 7 p.m. EDT: “The Columbia strike and the way forward for graduate workers.” We encourage Columbia graduate students to join this meeting and share it with your friends and colleagues.

A significant section of graduate workers at Columbia University have taken the courageous stand to continue their strike in defiance of the university and the United Auto Workers (UAW).

Last Friday night, the bargaining committee of the Graduate Workers of Columbia (GWC), which is affiliated with the UAW, put the strike on a so-called “pause,” despite an overwhelming 94 percent of strikers voting against ending the strike.

The attempt to shut down the strike came just two weeks before finals were set to begin—that is, the exact time when the strike would have the biggest impact. It also came as thousands of New York University graduate students, part of the same UAW local, are preparing to strike as well.

At a bargaining session on Monday evening, the university and the union made clear that, to them, the “pause” effectively signified the end of the strike. At Monday’s bargaining session, the sole item on the agenda was an “offer” by Columbia to provide back pay to the student workers for the time they were striking... but only if they agreed to make up the three weeks of work in the next two weeks.

The UAW clearly assured the university from the beginning that they would shut down the strike before grading. This strategy, however, encountered the resistance of students. To get around the opposition, they tried to pull a maneuver: a strike “pause” in exchange for third party contract mediation. Meanwhile, the striking students would go back to work.

A rose by any other name would smell as sweet... or, in this case, as rotten. A betrayal is a betrayal, even if it is called a “pause.”

The UAW is merely doing to graduate students at Columbia what it has done to autoworkers countless times before. Ask any autoworker and they will tell you: The UAW is a business, the sole purpose of which is to enforce the demands of management.

If this strike is not to be defeated, this is what must be done:

First, a mass membership meeting should be organized, outside of the control of the bargaining committee and the UAW. Graduate students must decide for themselves how this struggle is to be continued, not leave decisions to backroom negotiations between UAW executives and the university administration. Further strike action cannot be taken on an individual basis, which will leave students vulnerable to victimization, but through the decision of all striking workers.

Second, the existing bargaining committee should be repudiated. The BC has demonstrated that it is not acting as a representative of the workers, but as partner of the administration. A new strike committee should be elected, answerable to the student workers, not the UAW.

There is enormous support for the continuation of the strike among the rank-and-file members, who spoke passionately at the caucus meeting Monday about the insulting “offer” from Columbia.

One striker commented: “This strike is an absolute joke, if we have to make up the work and lick Columbia’s boots for it... if the BC accepts this, this will be the final declaration of whose side they are on. I invite anyone who had any illusions about who the BC is fighting for to join us and continue the strike. This is

a complete and utter joke that we went from health care and a pay raise to ‘you have two weeks to catch up on your work.’ And for this work... I know people who have instructors who have not graded assignments because they are waiting for their TAs to get off strike. This is terrible. Please join the on-going strike right now.”

Another striker declared: “Look at where we are right now. We are not negotiating about proper health care. We are not negotiating about a living wage. We are not negotiating about neutral arbitration. That is... at best, lost. Now we are talking about doing triple work for equal pay. We know where we stand right now, we stand now defeated because our BC has failed us.

“If you feel that this bargaining process has gone completely awry, and we are on the path right now to a horrible contract; if you are asking yourself what side is the BC on; if you are asking yourself all these questions and you know in your heart that this is unjust, take courage and do the only logical thing to do. Go back on strike, join those of us who are still on strike.”

The impassioned plea from the rank-and-file member continued: “If you remain, if you go back to work, and you start appealing to the BC to stand up for you or negotiate for you, you are lost. And you will continue to be lost... I don’t think the BC cares, I don’t think the UAW cares. They only want their fees.”

Graduate students of the Department of Religion sent a statement to other departments, announcing that they would continue the strike. It reads, “We reject the unilateral decision made by the unit’s ‘bargaining’ committee to call for a pause of our strike in order to enter mediation with no concessions from the University. ... Let us state in no uncertain terms that we are not undertaking these actions to strengthen the position of the current ‘bargaining’ committee at the negotiating table; they do not represent the unit.

“We recognize these tactics [by Columbia University] as the very same applied by bosses the world over. Though the clear intent is to break our spirit and our will, we are determined not only to endure but to triumph.”

Throughout the strike, the UAW has functioned as the principal strike breaker, de facto working on behalf not of the graduate students, but of Columbia University’s administration. The UAW is sitting on a \$790 million strike fund, yet it paid students only \$275

a week, an amount of money that is impossible to live on in New York City, one of the most expensive cities in the world. The UAW thus directly facilitated the efforts of the university administration to starve the strikers into submission.

The role of the UAW flows from the decades-long integration of the unions into corporate management and the capitalist state. Just like the Columbia administration, the UAW is keenly aware that the militancy of the Columbia graduate students reflects a much broader radicalization of the working class.

The ruling class as a whole is terrified that every struggle of workers has the potential to garner mass support. Over the past year, it has pursued a policy in response to the pandemic that has led to mass death and social misery. It is relying on organizations like the UAW to contain and suppress opposition.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality calls on Columbia graduate students to reject the efforts by the UAW to shut down their strike. Call a mass meeting of all striking workers! Repudiate the bargaining committee and elect a new leadership! Expand the struggle to the broadest sections of the working class!



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