

# Columbia graduate workers rebel against UAW as struggles brew at New York University

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7 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.*

On Friday, the Graduate Workers of Columbia (GWC), affiliated with the United Auto Workers union (UAW), agreed to a strike “pause” with Columbia University after nearly three weeks of striking. The agreement was reached behind the backs of the rank-and-file members who overwhelmingly wanted to continue the strike until their demands were met.

The maneuver by the UAW came just as the strike would have had its deepest impact, days before the grading period. By Monday evening, that is, three days later, the UAW made clear to its members that the “pause” for them really meant an end to the strike. None of the main demands of the strikers have been met.

Columbia University has insisted on a contract that would not just fail to meet graduate student demands, but, in fact, involve a pay cut. The administration, which is run by billionaires and multi-millionaires and oversees an endowment of \$11.3 billion (more than the GDP of many small countries, and half the GDP of countries like Somalia), has insultingly claimed that there is no money to pay for the most basic social needs of graduate students. In reality, the university, much like the ruling class as a whole, seeks to implement “COVID austerity” in an effort to fundamentally restructure class relations.

Many graduate students are rejecting the attempts to sell out the strike and, despite the best efforts of the UAW and Columbia University, it is not over. There is

enormous support for the continuation of the strike among the rank-and-file members and anger about the union.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality has called on students to hold a mass membership meeting, repudiate the existing bargaining committee and elect their own strike committee to continue the struggle.

So far, the efforts by graduate students to continue the strike have been dominated by a “reform caucus” of the UAW, which promotes the illusion that the UAW, through sufficient militancy from the rank-and-file, can be pressured to the left. While employing radical sounding rhetoric, the reform caucus is, in fact, opposed to a break with the UAW. It has made no attempt whatsoever to broaden the strike and appeal to workers outside Columbia University.

This, however, is the only way that the struggle can be carried forward. The role of the UAW in the strike is not an aberration, and any attempt to reform it is a dead end. The UAW is not a workers’ organization, but functions as an arm of corporate management and the state. Its officials who work to stifle open struggles by workers and sell them out whenever they occur earn hundreds of thousands of dollars every year.

The UAW official who has participated in the Columbia bargaining sessions, Gordon Deane, is a case in point. As the assistant director of the UAW 9A region, which covers much of the North East, including the New York City metropolitan area, Vermont, and Massachusetts, he takes home an annual salary of \$167,208.

It is, therefore, no accident that the UAW has sabotaged the Columbia strike from the beginning,

including by providing such meager strike pay that it effectively facilitated Columbia's efforts to starve graduate students into submission.

Above all, the UAW has sought to isolate the strike, even from the struggle at New York University (NYU), where graduate students are now preparing to go on strike during finals season. An ongoing strike authorization vote is set to end later this week. In the last bargaining session on Tuesday with GSOC-UAW, the NYU administration offered only one proposal for extending paid parental leave from four to six weeks.

NYU has consistently refused to budge on any of the major demands made by graduate students for higher wages and health care, even though GSOC-UAW has made one concession after another in over nine months of bargaining.

Over 70 undergraduate Teaching Assistants (TAs) in the General Engineering program at NYU, who are not unionized, also launched a strike on Monday, one of the first of its kind in US history. In response to a request by the *World Socialist Web Site*, they explained that they were demanding a wage increase from \$16.50 per hour to \$25 an hour to "adequately compensate TAs for the amount of work that we take on in running this course and for the required technical skills that we are expected to know."

General Engineering TAs carry a tremendous workload each semester, they added, "conducting recitations for students, leading and assisting their lab experiments as well as grading lab reports, lab presentations, and quizzes."

This workload has only increased over the last year as TAs were forced to "remodel the course to include in-person, hybrid, and remote options for students."

The union and the ruling class are so concerned with isolating and defeating the strike at Columbia because they are keenly aware that, one year into the pandemic, conditions are rife for a social explosion. In the US and internationally, workers have been forced back into factories and workplaces to ensure that profits continue to flow. This policy has caused countless infections and deaths. Now, as the coronavirus continues to rage, teachers are being forced back into schools across the country.

New York City epitomizes the staggering levels of social inequality that dominate capitalist society. The city is home to Wall Street, the center of the multi-

trillion-dollar hand-out of March 2020, and no less than 92 of America's richest billionaires. During the pandemic, New York billionaires collectively increased their wealth by \$81 billion to more than \$600 billion. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of workers have seen their jobs destroyed. City-wide unemployment now stands at 12.6 percent, twice the national average.

In Bronx County, which includes some of the most impoverished working-class communities in the country, unemployment stood at 17.7 percent, up from 4.6 percent last February. Over 1.66 million residents were enrolled for food stamp benefits in January, and food pantries had to provide nearly 100 million pounds of food since the beginning of the pandemic, a nearly 61 percent increase over the same period the prior year.

Columbia graduate students who are determined to continue their struggle and win cannot make one step forward without breaking out of the straitjacket of the UAW. Instead, they should make a conscious turn to the working class and fight for the expansion of the strike.



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