

New York University graduate workers vote to strike as UAW steps up efforts to shut down Columbia struggle

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The Graduate Student Organizing Committee (GSOC) at NYU released results of a strike authorization vote on April 8 revealing that 96 percent of graduate workers were prepared to strike. About two-thirds of the 2,000 workers participated in the poll. Graduate students at NYU have been negotiating with the university for over nine months over better wages, health care and child care benefits. Graduate students also demand that NYU cut ties with the New York Police Department (NYPD).

The strike authorization vote comes at a critical juncture in the Columbia graduate student strike. Last week, the bargaining committee of the Graduate Workers of Columbia (GWC) proclaimed a “pause” of the strike of 3,000 workers, despite overwhelming opposition from the rank and file.

Despite this sabotage by the GWC, which is affiliated with the notoriously corrupt United Auto Workers (UAW), there is still immense militancy among Columbia graduate workers. Some are continuing the strike despite the “pause,” especially graduate workers in the Department of Religion. Graduate students at the Department of Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies have expressed opposition to the “pause” and their support for graduate students who have chosen to continue the strike.

Representatives of the GWC bargaining committee (BC) met with Columbia negotiators on April 8, and have four more sessions scheduled over the next week, starting Sunday. All three parties—Columbia, the GWC BC and Andrea Cancer of the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, a former union bureaucrat, representing the federal government—clearly want to wrap up the strike as quickly as possible, with the April

15 and 16 sessions each scheduled to last from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.

One major factor behind their actions is their fear that the strike at Columbia could resume as finals begin and potentially link up with an incipient strike at NYU. The so-called “pause” still allows workers to strike, although they will be left without even the measly \$275 in weekly strike pay provided by the UAW for the first three weeks of the strike.

Like the GWC, GSOC is affiliated with the UAW. They are part of the same amalgamated local, UAW Local 2110, which has long negotiated concessionary contracts in New York City.

The UAW is determined to prevent these struggles from intersecting in any meaningful way. UAW Local 2110 President Maida Rosenstein has explicitly stated her opposition to linking up the strikes at Columbia and NYU, saying she did not want “outside factors” influencing GSOC members’ votes and at one point saying that the Columbia strike was only slated to last two weeks.

The fact that their Columbia colleagues were on strike for three weeks before a UAW-engineered “pause,” along with the possibility of a joint struggle, no doubt energized NYU graduate students, contributing to the substantial margin to authorize a strike.

The GSOC bargaining committee clearly does not want a strike. If they cannot avoid it, they will work to delay it until after the end of finals at Columbia. A GSOC email announcing the strike vote results told members that a deadline has not even been set yet but rather that “[t]he Bargaining Committee is in active discussion to find the best strategy for when to set the

strike deadline.”

According to GSOC, NYU does not want to meet again for bargaining until April 22. The union has not said that it would call a strike before then if the university continues stonewalling negotiations. If GSOC and NYU allow negotiations to stall for another two weeks, that would effectively preclude simultaneous strikes at NYU and Columbia this semester, as final exams at the latter conclude April 23.

The developments at NYU and Columbia sharply raise the question of political leadership.

There is still immense support for a continuation of the strike among graduate students at Columbia. Some of this determination to fight was expressed at a rally held April 9, organized by the GWC. Despite the relative lack of promotion, about 50 students attended. One graduate student from the Department of History denounced Columbia, whose Board of Trustees is packed with billionaires and millionaires, for functioning like a giant “hedge fund” rather than as an academic institution. The rally also featured a striker from the Department of Religion who expressed anger about the union’s efforts to shut down the strike and insisted that the strike had to continue.

He stressed, “The strike had been working, general strikes work. Columbia really doesn’t want us to strike right now. ... We know that a strike works even if it’s not supported by the union leadership and does not have the buy-in from every member of the unit. ... That’s why I’m standing here right now to tell you, to urge you to join our strike tonight. We can only be successful if this strike grows.”

However, this struggle is being actively sabotaged not just by the UAW directly, but also by the so-called reform caucus, which currently dominates the ongoing efforts by the graduate students who are still on strike.

The reform caucus opposes a break with the UAW and promotes the illusion that this anti-working-class organization can be pressured to the left. In reality, the UAW, like unions around the world, has been integrated into the capitalist state and corporate management for decades. In its efforts to isolate these struggles, the union works on behalf of a ruling class that is terrified that the socially explosive conditions in the US and internationally will give rise to a mass movement by the working class.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the International

Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) have fought throughout the Columbia strike for workers to broaden the struggle, break out of the straitjacket imposed by the UAW and orient to the working class in New York City and beyond.

This intervention has had a significant impact on a layer of graduate students. One of them told reporters on Friday that the WSWS coverage had “tapped into many people’s unhappiness about the bargaining committee.” Most students felt, he said, that the “UAW probably tries to get this [strike] over with.” He said that the bargaining committee should be repudiated and expressed interest in the demand for an independent strike committee.

What is needed now is for graduate students to take the next step. If kept within the confines of the union and these individual universities, the struggles at both NYU and Columbia are bound to be defeated. A new political leadership must be built that fights for the strikers to consciously broaden the strike into the working class. Graduate students who are prepared to take up this fight should reach out to the IYSSE today.



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