

UAW works overtime to end Columbia graduate strike before NYU graduate struggles begin

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The Graduate Workers of Columbia (GWC), affiliated with the United Auto Workers (UAW) are working overtime to bring the strike by 3,000 graduate workers at Columbia University to a close. The strike is currently on “pause,” a maneuver by the union to wind down the strike under the auspices of federal mediation. This action, carried out behind the backs of graduate students, has triggered overwhelming opposition from rank-and-file members, some of whom are continuing to strike.

The UAW is working as quickly as they can in order to prevent a situation in which two strikes at neighboring universities take place at the same time. The graduate worker union at New York University (NYU)—the UAW-affiliated Graduate Student Organizing Committee (GSOC)—has been purposely delaying a strike for months. Earlier this week, GSOC announced a strike deadline of April 26. This follows a vote at NYU, which concluded April 8, showing 96.4 percent of graduate workers in favor of going on strike to demand a living wage from the university.

This delayed strike deadline, coming two and a half weeks after the strike authorization vote, is in line with the UAW’s strategy to isolate graduate students at Columbia and NYU and prevent a joint struggle. Moreover, in the lead-up to the potential strike, GSOC has proposed lowering its demands to NYU.

GWC and GSOC are part of the same amalgamated UAW local 2110, yet the local’s president, Maida Rosenstein, explicitly stated her opposition to linking up the strikes at Columbia and NYU at a GSOC meeting in March.

The UAW-imposed isolation of graduate workers’ struggles is coming to a head at Columbia, now three

weeks since the beginning of the strike. The “pause” was imposed just before grading season was about to begin, which would have given graduate workers enormous power by withholding grades.

Student workers should be under no illusions that the strike “pause” is a temporary action. It is an indication that the UAW is changing its tactics in order to more quickly bring about an end to the strike, without meeting any of the central demands of the strikers. Bringing in a “neutral” third party is a hallmark of a UAW sellout. This case is no different. Andrea Cancer was selected last week as the so-called third party arbitrator. Cancer is a former SEIU bureaucrat who will undoubtedly legitimize the concessions contract at the UAW strike with CU.

In an expression of clear hostility to these actions and the desire to continue to fight, some graduate student workers have remained on strike. By agreeing to the “pause,” and encouraging students to make up lost work, the GWC has effectively isolated the graduate workers who remain on strike, leaving them at risk for retaliation from the university.

Earlier this week, a statement was circulated and signed by Columbia graduate language instructors strongly opposing the efforts and actions by the GWC-UAW Bargaining Committee (BC) to concede on demands. “If negotiations do not make progress towards [the unit’s original baseline demands] we are ready to resume the strike—our strongest tactic—including a grading strike. We pledge to vote down any contract that falls short of this baseline, and to help turn out the no vote against an unsatisfactory contract.”

Meanwhile, Columbia and the UAW are feverishly

scheduling five-hour-long bargaining sessions this week in a blatant attempt to wrap up a deal before a strike at NYU begins.

Most recently, the BC has been further conceding on graduate workers' demands for living wages. After previously dropping the minimum salary for 12-month PhD worker appointments from \$45,850 to \$43,596, the latest proposal from the BC lowers this salary to \$42,766. Likewise, after dropping the minimum hourly rate for graduate workers from \$35/hour to \$28/hour and from \$26/hour to \$22/hour for undergraduate workers covered in the contract, the BC is now proposing a lower rate of \$20/hour for undergraduates and \$25/hour for graduates.

The BC has also previously lowered compensation rate demands for the first year of the three-year contract—against immense opposition from the bargaining unit—from a 5 percent increase to a 3 percent increase. This means that graduate workers would take a de-facto pay cut, taking into account inflation and union dues.

Meanwhile, the university is proposing a measly 2 percent increase from the current salary of \$41,520 to \$42,350, and a minimum hourly wage of just \$17/hour for both undergraduate and graduate workers.

The stonewalling of one of the wealthiest universities in the world, along with the significant series of concessions made by the BC and supported by the UAW, both uphold poverty-level wages, which graduate workers have been courageously fighting against.

As the repeated actions of the UAW make clear, the leadership of the struggles at both Columbia and NYU must be taken out of the hands of the union. Everything the UAW has done since winning representation of the Columbia students has been aimed at suppressing their struggle.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality calls on graduate students to form an independent strike committee to expand the strike and mobilize workers throughout New York and beyond.



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