Yes, Columbia University has the resources to meet graduate workers' needs

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The struggle of 3,000 Columbia University graduate student-workers for decent pay, health care, child care and other benefits is at a critical turning point. Over the course of this week, negotiators from the Graduate Workers of Columbia (GWC) union and Columbia management are meeting with a federal negotiator, commonly known as "third-party mediation." The GWC bargaining committee agreed to third-party mediation in exchange for a strike "pause" last week in direct opposition to the will of the rank-and-file members.

The importance of the struggle at Columbia is underscored by the recent 96 percent vote in favor of strike authorization by over 2,000 graduate workers at New York University (NYU). The Columbia and NYU graduate workers are members of the same amalgamated local of the United Auto Workers (UAW) union, which is seeking to divide and isolate these struggles and push through concessionary contracts.

As a rule, mediated negotiations like those happening at Columbia invariably end up with a pro-management deal which the union will try to sell to its membership, perhaps with a fig leaf of a concession. Given the recent actions of the GWC bargaining committee—including "pausing" the strike at the very moment the strike would have its deepest impact as finals approached—one is not led to believe that these negotiations will produce an exception.

The central argument from Columbia is that the university does not have enough funding to provide even the reduced demands the GWC negotiators brought to the table at the beginning of the strike. At a recent negotiating session, Columbia's lead negotiator, high-priced outside lawyer Bernie Plum, said that the GWC's proposal was $30-40 million away from what Columbia was willing to spend, and that the union should pick two-three "priorities" which they could perhaps achieve.

Claims that Columbia, an Ivy League university in New York City, cannot spare an extra $30 or even $40 million to provide a decent standard of living to its graduate teaching assistants and research assistants should be rejected with contempt. A further examination of the school's financials proves the absurdity of its claim, and sheds light on the way forward for graduate workers, other educators and the working class more broadly.

Columbia University's assets

Columbia University is a wealthy business operation, controlled by wealthy people. Its net assets totaled $16.3 billion at the end of fiscal year 2020, based on a financial report from PwC (formerly PricewaterhouseCoopers).

The sums of money in which Columbia deals are staggering. In 2020, the university collected $1.7 billion in tuition, $1.3 billion in patient care revenue (the university operates a hospital in partnership with NewYork-Presbyterian), and $1 billion in government grants.

In 2018, the most recent year for which the university's Form 990 is publicly available, Columbia spent $14.3 million just in "[c]ompensation of current officers, directors, trustees, and key employees." Thousands of other staff, including over 4,000 faculty alone, received $2.5 billion in salaries and wages.

Columbia's assets are large enough that in 2018 it spent $11.4 million just in "[i]nvestment management fees" (down from nearly $15 million in 2017).

It also owns a large amount of real estate in New York City, one of the most expensive housing markets in the world. By some estimates, it is the largest private landowner, beating New York University. Its 2018 Form 990 listed $478 million in land assets and $7 billion in buildings (minus $4 billion in depreciation).

The university is rapidly seeking to expand its campus, recently buying and constructing on 17 acres to the north of the Morningside Heights campus. The new campus (totaling nearly 7 million square feet) will be dubbed Manhattanville, and will certainly accelerate gentrification and higher rents for longtime residents of West Harlem.

Columbia's endowment is $11.3 billion, growing over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic thanks to alumni donations and the stock market bubble. While the university notes that this is small compared to some of its rivals—Harvard University famously tops $40 billion—this is close to the gross domestic product of Namibia and exceeds that of dozens of countries, some of which have fewer citizens than Columbia has students.

When graduate workers and their allies point out the scope of the university's assets—particularly its endowment—Columbia administrators are quick to respond that most of the endowment cannot simply be spent however they decide, but must be invested and spent as the donors laid out. If anything, this further emphasizes the tyranny of the wealthy over society in general and higher education in particular. In other words, Columbia's great defense is that they are held hostage to the whims of wealthy "philanthropists," including long-dead ones, who were able to spend hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars to have a professorship, scholarship or building named after them.

To expand this endowment and meet its current-use needs, the university raises huge sums of money, and is closing in on its target to raise $5 billion in five years. During Giving Day, held in October 2020, Columbia raised $24 million, a 9 percent increase over 2019, despite the pandemic.

While these statistics alone demonstrate that Columbia can afford to meet graduate workers' needs—or certainly could if it weren't prioritizing a new building for Columbia Business School in West Harlem—the salaries pulled down by Columbia President Lee Bollinger and others prove this definitively.

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Top-level salaries: Where has all the money gone?

Bollinger earned over $4.5 million in salary and other compensation from Columbia in 2018, with recent reports indicating that he has received a “modest” raise of $100,000-200,000. He also receives free housing in a plush mansion on the Morningside Heights campus. Business Insider placed him eighth on a list of the highest paid college and university presidents based on 2017 data, when he made “only” $2.2 million. If he were to forgo his current salary for the duration of the three-year GWC contract, that would cover one-third to one-half of the alleged gap between what Columbia is willing to spend and the modest demands of the GWC.

In 2018, Peter Holland, CEO and president of the Columbia Investment Management Company, pulled in even more, making $6.2 million in salary and other compensation from Columbia and its related organizations. Lee Goldman, executive vice president for health sciences, earned $2 million.

If these three positions’ salaries alone were not paid out for the course of the contract, that would total $38 million in savings, which could provide 3,000 graduate workers with a modicum of dignity and security. There are other highly paid administrators (and a handful of multi-millionaire professors), who make staggering sums: all in all, 16, including the above-named, made $37.2 million.

The wealth of Columbia’s Board of Trustees

Last month, the *World Socialist Web Site* published an analysis of the Columbia Board of Trustees. We explained at the time:

> Of the 24 members of Columbia’s Board of Trustees, only a small handful do not run hedge funds, multi-million-dollar investment companies or venture capitalist firms. The net worth of every board member is not publicly available, however there is no doubt that combined, the Board of Trustees at Columbia University controls hundreds of billions of dollars. Their wealth has largely been created through high-level Wall Street schemes that oftentimes are completely separated from any form of production. In other words, the money is made through bets and speculation and does nothing to contribute to society.

The Board of Trustees is a cross-section of the US bourgeoisie. They do not simply represent the ruling class, they are the ruling class. The board includes CEOs and other top executives at hedge funds, scions of wealthy families, a former federal judge, and Obama-era Secretary of Homeland Security Jeh Johnson.

Noam Gottesman, the board’s vice-chair, is CEO of TOMS Capital LLC. We noted, “He was listed on the 2020 Forbes 400 list of richest people in the US, with a net worth of $2.4 billion.”

Another board member, Adam Pritzker, is CEO of Assembled Brands. He sold his first company, which he co-founded with two other people, for $400 million. He is a member of the oligarchic Pritzker family, which includes Thomas Pritzker (Adam’s uncle), the CEO of Hyatt Hotels Corporation, and J. B. Pritzker, the billionaire governor of Illinois. Seven Pritzkers are on Forbes 400 list, and they are the ninth wealthiest US family, also according to *Forbes*.

Needless to say, providing a decent standard of living for graduate students would be chump change for the collective Board of Trustees.

Pitting workers against each other: “Everybody else experienced a wage freeze”

“As we’ve said over and over again, everybody else experienced a wage freeze,” declared an exasperated Bernie Plum, speaking on behalf of Columbia, in a bargaining session on March 30. Columbia University has repeatedly argued that graduate students should not expect, or perhaps do not deserve, a raise, simply because other Columbia workers have not received one this year.

Morgan, a Columbia worker whose name has been changed to protect their anonymity, explained to the *World Socialist Web Site* the situation confronting staff:

> Most staff have had their salaries frozen, and many sections of the university currently have a hiring and promotion freeze. We usually get a performance-based semi-COLA [cost of living allowance] each June, when the fiscal year ends. The university didn’t do that in 2020 due to the pandemic, but then raised a ton of money in October [for Giving Day]. They also haven’t said if they’ll be giving any raises in a few months when this fiscal year ends. Many of my coworkers, especially those with families and increasing rents, really rely on those raises. Without them we’re effectively taking a pay cut thanks to inflation.
>
> None of us are happy with the freezes—positions going unfilled for months means more work for those who remain. They’ve also cut our retirement benefits. But I haven’t heard any opposition from my colleagues to graduate workers getting raises. Certainly there hasn’t been any organized opposition to the graduate workers from anyone other than the top administrators. The attempt to divide us is foul.

Indeed, graduate workers have found substantial support on the campus, including from faculty who have issued statements in support of the strike and various academic centers which have canceled events through the end of the semester in solidarity. Particularly when understood in terms of the vital research and instruction graduate workers do at Columbia, integral to the mission of any university, efforts to cynically cite the salary freeze are deeply reactionary.

The conditions facing graduate workers

Graduate workers in New York City, including at Columbia, have every reason to struggle. The cost of living in the city is astronomical, with rents, food and most recreational activities among the most expensive in the country. Columbia graduate workers have an annual base salary between $26,000 to $36,000—meager during the best of times.

The average rent for a two-bedroom apartment is nearly $3,800 a month, essentially impossible even for two graduate students living together. Many graduate students live in subsidized housing owned by Columbia, costing “only” $1,300 per month, a substantial percentage of a graduate worker’s wage. This also puts students in the strange situation of paying a large portion of their wages back to their employer in the form of rent.

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Students often rent housing for 12 months, but only work and study for nine. They typically rely on subletting their apartments for the summer months to people interning in the city to make ends meet—something that was impossible last year due to the pandemic. Summer stipends and base pay are among the top demands of the graduate workers.

Graduate workers who have spoken to the WSWS on the picket line also describe how they often have to work more than the contractually mandated 20 hours per week, in addition to their own studies and research.

Daniel, a graduate student who spoke to the WSWS in March, summed it up when he said: “There’s a lot of inequality at the university. A lot of people are working very hard and are not getting what they deserve.”

All of these factors serve to restrict higher education, especially at elite universities in major cities like Columbia, to the wealthy and their children. Few can afford to live, study and work in New York on such meager wages without assistance from their parents or their own independent wealth. As costs continue to rise and wages stay low, the possibility of getting a graduate degree becomes even more out of reach for those of more modest backgrounds. The alternative is crushing student debt.

The way forward for graduate workers

The struggle of Columbia graduate workers is of significance not just to the researchers and instructors currently at Columbia, or even just for the students they teach. The fight they are in now will determine conditions not just at Columbia for the foreseeable future, but will set the tone for such contracts on a broader scale. The questions of who will pay for the effects of the pandemic, and whether higher education will return to being the domain only of the wealthy, are at stake.

Ultimately, this struggle boils down to the key question: Who controls the resources of society, and toward what ends?

As even this brief review indicates, there are immense resources which could be directed toward education, as well as infrastructure and other pressing social needs. However, these resources are monopolized by the ruling class, including the hedge fund managers who sit on Columbia’s Board of Trustees.

If social needs, including the need for well-compensated educators and for education to be available to all, are to be met, graduate students will need a new strategy. They must turn to the working class as a whole, the majority of society, and fight for a socialist perspective. This is the aim of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE). We urge graduate workers who are interested in taking up this fight to contact us today.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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