

Columbia graduate workers: Reject UAW concessions and Columbia's "final offer"!

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On Sunday evening, Columbia University and the Bargaining Committee for the United Auto Workers (UAW)-affiliated Graduate Workers of Columbia (GWC) made clear that they intend to bring the yearslong contract "negotiations" for the more than 3,000 graduate workers to a conclusion.

Teaching and research assistants at Columbia—located in one of the most expensive cities in the world—went on strike nearly one month ago, fighting for improved living and working conditions and against "COVID austerity."

On Sunday, the university declared that its new abysmal proposal, negotiated through a "neutral" third party mediator, was a "last and final offer."

After initially demanding a minimum salary of \$47,800 (a 15 percent increase above the current \$41,520) for 12-month Ph.D. appointments and minimum salary increases of 5 percent/4 percent/4 percent over the course of the three-year contract, the latest proposal from the bargaining committee (BC) asked for just \$42,766 (a 3 percent increase) and 3/3/4 percent increases.

The BC has also significantly lowered minimum hourly rate demands for graduate workers and undergraduate workers from \$35 and \$26, respectively, to now just \$17/\$18.50/\$20 across the board for the three years of the contract, which Columbia has agreed to.

It is noteworthy that struggling graduate workers at New York University (NYU) currently have a minimum rate of \$20/hr and are set to go on strike next week for higher "living" wages. In other words, the NYU graduate workers, who are part of the same local union, will be striking in the coming weeks against the very conditions that the UAW has just "negotiated" for the Columbia workers!

In response, the university's "final" counteroffer consists of a minimum salary increase of 2 percent/2.5 percent/3 percent for Ph.D. students, with an added 1 percent lump sum for the first year. Columbia is also

offering \$4,000/\$4,500/\$4,750/\$5,000 for summer stipends (for PhDs on a 9-month appointment) covering 2021-2024, with an additional \$1,000 of COVID-19 relief for Summer 2021.

The federal mediator who communicated the university's offer, Andrea Cancer, a former union bureaucrat, emphasized that Columbia has no "major moves" left and falsely asserted that the \$11 billion-endowed Ivy League university does not have a lot of "financial wiggle room." However, she said that she would be happy to try to advocate for a half-percent change to this measly offer if the BC thought it was necessary. So much for a neutral third party mediator!

A bargaining session was set up for Monday morning at 11:30 a.m. for the BC to respond to the offer. Clearly the committee is chomping at the bit to end the strike and is eager to accept the tentative agreement. It is only the immense opposition from the rank and file, no small matter, that stands in its way.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality urges graduate workers to reject this sellout contract and organize a real opposition among the rank and file. The strike has incredible potential to expand beyond the confines of the campus into the working class.

However, in order for the struggle to continue, the opposition must consider the experience of the strike as a whole and draw the necessary conclusions.

Taking into account two percent union dues and an inflation rate of two percent, the union has "succeeded" in turning a yearslong fight for living wages into a *de facto* pay cut for the first year of the contract. There are only two entities that stand to gain financially from this contract: Columbia University and the UAW, which will see an increase in its revenue stream from dues payments from graduate workers.

Everything that the UAW and the BC have done since

the start of the strike has served to demobilize and demoralize the student workers and ultimately defeat the strike.

As the strike was gaining steam in its third week, the BC agreed to a “pause” in exchange for federal mediation, behind the backs of the rank-and-file members. Only days earlier, a poll of the unit revealed that an overwhelming 96 percent of the strikers wished to continue the strike.

A particularly foul role has been played by the three BC members who are part of the Academic Workers for a Democratic Union (AWDU), the so-called reform caucus of the UAW, who have consistently postured as opponents of the other seven BC members while taking no measures to organize opposition. Rather, they have sought to dissuade workers from taking any independent action.

Graduate workers must understand that their fight for a living wage, improved working conditions and democratic rights is a political struggle. Their demands cannot be achieved within the confines of the campus and through organizations like the trade unions, which work on behalf of the employer.

The ruling class is acutely aware that social conditions in the US are explosive. There is immense anger brewing among workers as they are left to fend for themselves while the billionaires continue to rake in record profits, including over \$1.4 trillion over the past year alone.

Columbia is determined to defeat the strike not only for its own “bottom line” but as part of a broader strategy of the capitalist class, which is intent on imposing massive austerity on workers to pay back the trillions of dollars that were handed over to Wall Street and the corporations at the start of the pandemic.

However, the graduate students have immensely powerful allies in the working class, and there is enormous potential to expand the strike!

It is precisely for this reason that the UAW has kept the strike completely hidden from the autoworkers they claim to represent. They are aware that solidarity between the students and the autoworkers would galvanize the struggles of autoworkers and students. Such unity would threaten to spiral out of its control and develop into a common struggle of workers across many industries.

The Columbia strike is unfolding as the UAW in Michigan is forcing workers into plants where large numbers of COVID-19 cases are being reported. Jefferson North Assembly Plant (JNAP) workers in the trim department staged a protest Friday during the day shift,

halting production after a worker was sent home after testing positive for COVID-19. So many workers are either sick or quarantined that management personnel have been brought on the line to run production.

The workers in the auto plants are engaged in a struggle against the same political forces and the same union bureaucrats in a fight for their own lives, the lives of their families and loved ones.

Nearly 3,000 manufacturing workers at the Volvo Truck Plant’s New River Valley factory in Dublin, Virginia went on strike Friday. Currently 1,100 Warrior Met coal miners in Alabama, 1,300 steelworkers at Allegheny Technologies Inc. (ATI) facilities in five states, and over 700 nurses in the Massachusetts Nurses Association (MNA) in Worcester are on strike.

The situation is equally explosive throughout the world.

It is to this social force that graduate students must turn. The *World Socialist Web Site* has helped facilitate the organization of a network of committees across the US and globally, from the West Coast to Chicago, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Texas, and other cities and states, along with logistics workers and autoworkers, to create genuine fighting organizations opposed to the big business parties and the so-called unions.

To expand their strike, Columbia University grad strikers must follow suit and build their own independent rank-and-file strike committee. Their demands must be dictated by the needs of the workers, not what the university says it can afford. The committee should send delegations to workplaces and factories in New York and beyond to explain your struggle to autoworkers, teachers, transit workers, hospital workers, retail workers and other sections of the working class.



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