

Vote “no” on the UAW sellout of Columbia University graduate strike!

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On Monday afternoon, the Bargaining Committee for the Graduate Workers of Columbia (GWC), an affiliate of the United Auto Workers (UAW), agreed to a tentative contract with the university that imposes a de facto pay cut in the first year. The BC accepted the tentative agreement in direct opposition to the will of rank-and-file members, who must still vote on the deal.

The contract does not come close to meeting any of the graduate student workers’ original demands, including increased wages, child care, dental, third party arbitration and summer stipends. The three-year contract also includes a “no-strike clause” and guarantees the deduction of two percent of their wages for union dues payments to the UAW.

Facing immense hostility from the rank and file, the Bargaining Committee is attempting to tightly control the ratification process. Graduate workers reported that at Monday night’s general body meeting, the BC refused to answer questions on the timeline for the vote ratification. It did, however, make clear that it would be in charge of determining it.

Three members of the BC who are part of the Academic Workers for a Democratic Union (AWDU), the so-called reform caucus of the UAW, have come out in nominal opposition to the contract. However, all three members have consistently postured as opponents of the other seven BC members while taking no measures to actually organize opposition.

The three AWDU members reportedly made clear to the members, at multiple points in the meeting, that the “official” recommendation from the BC was to accept the agreement.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) urges Columbia graduate workers to campaign for a rejection of the tentative agreement, which will only exacerbate the dire conditions graduate workers face and set the tone for the many graduate student struggles on the horizon. Most importantly the IYSSE urges student workers to draw the necessary political conclusions from this entire experience: Not a single step forward can be taken within the confines of the UAW, and no trust can be put in the reform caucus members.

Graduate students must form a rank-and-file committee to take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands and unite with grad student workers at New York University, who are set to walk out next Monday, to prepare common strike action. At the same time, this committee should appeal to workers throughout the city—educators, public transit, UPS, Amazon, Verizon and other sections of workers—to join in a common fight against the criminal

response of the ruling class to the pandemic and its sacrifice of human life for corporate profit.

Graduate workers must understand that they, like millions of workers in the city, the country and around the world, are engaged in a fight against powerful corporate and financial powers and their political representatives. Both the Democrats and Republicans are determined to impose massive austerity on workers to pay back the trillions of dollars that they handed to Wall Street and the corporations at the start of the pandemic.

Columbia University and the UAW are working with a *class strategy*. In order for the strike to be taken forward, there must be an orientation to the natural class allies of the student workers: the working class.

The attempt by the UAW to ram through this miserable sellout contract fully confirms the warnings advanced by the WSW and IYSSE: The UAW has been preparing for the sellout since before the strike began. As the WSW has reported in dozens of articles, everything that the UAW and the Bargaining Committee (BC) have done has served to demobilize the student workers.

In the face of stonewalling from the university in over 60 bargaining sessions, the BC and the UAW made no attempt to broaden the strike of over 3,000 grad students, which began on March 15. In fact, the union local president, Maida Rosenstein, explicitly called for the separation of the Columbia University graduate workers’ struggle from the New York University (NYU) workers, who are a part of the same union UAW Local 2110.

At every turn, the BC made concessions to the university. 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.

As for the UAW, they worked out of the same playbook they have used with autoworkers for four decades, isolating the struggle, keeping the strike hidden from their nearly 400,000 members and facilitating the economic blackmail against the strikers by issuing a meager \$275 a week in strike pay.

There is immense hostility among the rank and file to the tentative agreement, the BC and the UAW as a whole. A significant portion of grad student workers has already begun organizing a “no” vote through social media and other means. In the unit meeting held Monday night, workers denounced the contract with contempt. One worker, appealing to fellow students

for a “no” vote, said, “I don’t want to spend time saying this is a bad contract. We know this is a bad contract. We are Ph.D. students. Just compare our demands with what is in the TA. If it was any other BC, you would vote it down.”

Many workers described the actions of the BC as “cowardly” and antidemocratic. They repeatedly called out the BC for going behind their backs. At least a dozen workers rightly raised concerns over how the vote will be carried out.

The union was so nervous about opposition that in the General Body Meeting held to convince workers to accept the sellout, they disabled the chat and view of other participants. In other words, as opposed to every other General Body Meeting held in the history of the union local, at arguably the most important meeting, the organizers restricted the workers from being able to speak to each other or to unmute themselves.

In response to the meeting format and the content of the “agreement” one worker said, “This webinar is an indication of just how tyrannical this bargaining committee is. ... You want me to ‘name my feelings’? Ok. I feel double patronized. First, by Columbia, but then from you all.”

Many graduate student departments have made public statements denouncing the actions of the bargaining committee and vowing to collectively vote “no” on the contract. A statement issued from the graduate workers in the Department of Middle Eastern, South Asian and African Studies even before the tentative agreement was agreed to reads:

We condemn the BC’s willingness to actively undermine the will of the majority of rank-and-file members. The BC has not only failed to leverage our strike at the bargaining table but has in fact done the exact opposite by consistently lowering our demands, claiming that our economic demands should be dropped because Columbia currently has “financial” difficulties. In suppressing intense opposition by unit members at every turn, the Bargaining Committee has done the work of Columbia for them.

The unions are doing to graduate workers what they have done to other sections of the working class before: suppressing and isolating their struggles, while facilitating the implementation of austerity at the behest of the ruling class and its political servants in the Democratic and Republican parties.

The UAW has a long history of vote-rigging, intimidation and threats against the workers, as well as ballot stuffing in order to force through contracts. A yearslong federal investigation and criminal probe into the international union proved that the UAW took at least \$3.5 million in bribes from the Big Three auto companies between 2009-16 in exchange for company-friendly contracts.

The probe uncovered extensive corruption and resulted in the convictions of 12 UAW officials, including the last two union presidents, Gary Jones and Dennis Williams.

An autoworker from the Faurecia Gladstone Plant in Indiana, who is a member of a rank-and-file committee independent of the

UAW, issued this statement to Columbia graduate workers:

Yes, the UAW will betray you. It has betrayed all of its people in the automotive industry, in the schools, everyone. Look at the reports where the president of the union was arrested for embezzlement. It is all about the money for them. It is not about what is right for the members of the union. It’s what they can get out of it. They are just an extension of the university’s grip over their employees to make them money. To make them do what they want. I would not trust them as far as I could throw them.

They may ask you to vote on things, but if it’s not what the university wants, they are going to push through what the University wants. And they are going to out-and-out lie to the grad students. Like for example, they got this many votes in favor of the contract and there were only a small number against. I found out at my plant that our union stated that only 26 people had voted against the contract, and I talked to at least 75 people myself who had voted against it. And the union pushed it through. They out-and-out lie to you.

Speaking to the WSWs, many Columbia graduate workers expressed their anger about the union and the tentative agreement. However, anger and militancy, while important, is not enough. Graduate workers must now adopt a new political strategy.

The Columbia strike is unfolding amid a backdrop of workers struggles throughout the country, including Stellantis autoworkers who downed their tools at the Jefferson North Assembly Plant in Detroit Friday over the refusal of the company and the UAW to protect them against the spread of COVID-19.

Nearly 3,000 manufacturing workers at the Volvo Truck Plant’s New River Valley factory in Dublin, Virginia went on strike Friday, fighting to recoup the concessions the UAW handed to the multinational corporation over the last three contracts. Another 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 also on strike.

Columbia workers cannot rely on this or that union bureaucrat or politician to take up their fight. Rather they must turn to their class allies: autoworkers, nurses, Amazon workers, produce workers and all other sections of the working throughout the country for a common struggle against the capitalist system and for socialism.



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