

As opposition brews at Columbia University

UAW works to sell out New York University strike before it starts

International Youth and Students for Social Equality at New York University
22 April 2021

The IYSSE at NYU will be hosting a meeting, “A socialist perspective for Columbia and NYU graduate students,” on Wednesday, April 28, at 7 p.m. We encourage graduate students, undergraduates and workers from the New York City area to attend.

More than 2,000 graduate student workers at New York University (NYU) are preparing to go on strike on Monday for living wages, proper health care coverage, safe working conditions, adequate child care benefits, and the demand “NYPD off campus.” Two weeks ago, over 96 percent of the members of the Graduate Student Organizing Committee (GSOC) at NYU, which is affiliated with the UAW, voted in favor of a strike.

A sharp warning must be made: Before the strike has even begun, the UAW is doing everything to sell it out. During 10 months of negotiations, NYU has done nothing but stonewall workers’ demands while the GSOC has worked to prevent a strike, making ever-greater concessions to the university and repeatedly extending the 2015 contract that includes a “no-strike clause.”

Since the strike authorization vote, the GSOC has stepped up its efforts to create conditions that would allow them to call off any strike action at the last minute. The GSOC has made significant concessions to the university, including further lowering wage demands from \$38 per hour to \$32 per hour and lowering remission on combined tuition for working Masters students from 100 percent to 40 percent.

The lowering of these demands went against votes by the membership last week, and had not been communicated to GSOC members until after the proposals were presented to NYU.

The president of GSOC Local 2110, which also includes Columbia graduate workers, is Maida Rosenstein. Rosenstein spoke to the Bargaining Committee (BC) and

a small group of rank-and-file workers between bargaining sessions with the university on Thursday. In the discussion, she strongly advocated for further lowering demands on compensation, stressing that \$32 was “unrealistic.” She also peddled the lie that a strike by graduate workers could harm lower-paid workers at the university, actively discouraging graduate students from going on strike.

Then, after a whole day of bargaining, the BC offered to be “available” for further negotiations with NYU all weekend. There is a real danger that the strike will be called off at the last minute, with none of the major demands by graduate students met.

The experience of the strike at Columbia University offers important lessons for NYU graduate students and places the question of leadership front and center. The same UAW Local 2110 that the GSOC is affiliated with is working to shut down the strike of more than 3,000 graduate workers at Columbia University, just six miles north of the NYU campus. The UAW has kept the strike hidden from its nearly 400,000 members and has facilitated economic blackmail against the strikers by issuing a measly \$275 a week in strike pay, despite sitting on a strike fund of almost \$800 million. Rosenstein, the local president, has explicitly opposed uniting the Columbia University graduate workers’ strike with the strike at NYU.

As the strike was gaining momentum in its third week, the Bargaining Committee for the Graduate Workers of Columbia (GWC) agreed to a strike “pause,” against the will of the rank-and-file. On Monday, a week before the NYU strike deadline, the GWC BC agreed to a tentative contract with the university that imposes a de facto pay cut in the first year and does not come close to meeting any of the original demands advanced by graduate

workers. The tentative contract includes a “no-strike clause” and guarantees the deduction of 2 percent of workers’ wages for union dues payments to the UAW.

The Columbia strike clearly demonstrates that not one step forward can be taken while graduate workers are tied to the trade unions. The UAW is one of the most prominent examples of the degeneration of the trade unions over the last 40 years. Although originally formed by left-wing workers during the semi-insurrectionary class battles of the Great Depression that won significant gains for auto workers, the UAW ceased to be a workers’ organization decades ago.

With globalization, the rise of transnational corporations, and the ever-deepening crisis of US capitalism over the last 50 years, the trade unions, based on a national program and tied to the capitalist nation-state, have become integrated into corporate management and the state apparatus. Since the late 1970s, they have worked together with the ruling class to strangle workers’ struggles, increase profits, and line the pockets of a small layer of union executives.

Over the last year, the UAW has obediently carried out the dictates of the ruling class by keeping workers in contaminated factories and workplaces amid the pandemic to ensure the continued production of profits. For these services rendered, it has received an enormous payoff.

After over four decades of betrayals, large sections of workers no longer see a way forward within these rotten organizations and are entering into a rebellion against the unions. The rejection of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) by workers at Amazon’s Bessemer, Alabama, plant two weeks ago sharply exposed the extent of workers’ alienation from these organizations.

At Columbia University, anger within the rank-and-file about the blatant union betrayal is running high. A significant section of Columbia graduate workers are organizing to stop the union from ramming through the sellout contract.

However, the experience of all previous struggles—including the Columbia strike itself—shows that militancy from the rank-and-file alone is not enough. What is urgently required is a political perspective and new organizations.

The struggle of graduate workers will not succeed outside of the development of a political leadership oriented toward the struggles of the entire working class for its social rights. Fundamentally, this requires a

socialist perspective and an understanding that, implicitly, what is involved is a struggle against the capitalist system.

When workers at NYU and Columbia enter into a fight against their universities, they are battling the powerful forces of Wall Street, the state and the Democratic Party. Both schools embody the subordination of academia to private profit and the state. NYU and Columbia are run by a collection of Wall Street and Democratic Party operatives and maintain deep ties to US imperialism.

Over the last month, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the youth and student wing of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), has powerfully intervened in the Columbia graduate strike. Basing itself on a Marxist perspective, the IYSSE has consistently warned of and exposed the treachery of the UAW. We have fought for the expansion of the strike to other campuses and, most importantly, into the broad sections of the working class in New York City and beyond that are now entering into struggle.

To take the control of these strikes out of the hands of the unions, we are calling for the formation of rank-and-file committees. In New York, across the US and internationally, such committees have already been formed among teachers as well as auto and Amazon workers. They are completely independent from the unions and the Democratic Party and answer to workers only. They advance demands based not on what the universities and corporations claim is “affordable” but what workers need.

Significant layers of graduate students, workers and undergraduates in New York have followed this coverage and our exposures. We now call upon all those who agree with this perspective to contact us, join the IYSSE, and take up the fight for socialism!



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