Graduate students at New York University go on strike

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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.

On Monday, 2,000 graduate students at New York University began a strike on the eve of the finals period. The students are organized under the Graduate Student Organizing Committee (GSOC), which is affiliated with the United Auto Workers (UAW). The graduate students are demanding higher wages and better health care and child care benefits. They also demand that the New York Police Department (NYPD) be removed from campus and that international and immigrant students receive better protection.

Members of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at NYU spoke to several striking graduate students on the picket line Monday who detailed the issues they are concerned about.

One teaching assistant in the sociology department said, "I'm out here striking for a living wage, better health care, parental benefits, protections for international students, and for the university to commit to addressing serious health and safety issues like NYPD on campus. The wage increases being proposed by the university are a joke. I make $20 per hour and am officially limited to 20 hours a week. That's nothing. We need a living wage so workers don't have to work two or more jobs at once. Immigrant and international students usually can't get additional jobs, so they have to try to get by on nothing."

"If you look at how much money comes in from course costs alone, you can already see how ridiculous it is to claim that "there is no money" to pay grad workers a living wage. Many students with medical problems have had to pay thousands of dollars for the simplest procedures, medication, etc... NYPD off campus is also an important issue for me. The past year has clearly brought to light that this is a major health and safety issue."

Asked about uniting with grad workers at Columbia and expanding the strike to other university campuses and into broad sections of the working class, she said, "I completely agree with this perspective. Solidarity with other students and workers is the only way forward."

A research assistant in the religion department told the IYSSE, "Getting the NYPD off of campus is a central issue for me. Students won't be safe until we get them off campus."

Refuting NYU's claim that there is "no money" to meet the demands by graduate students, he said, "The fact that they decide to have loads of money tied up in infrastructure demonstrates that they are more than able to pay us a living wage. If you look at tuition costs alone it's completely ridiculous that they label our demands as unreasonable.

"The health care situation is terrible. I had a really bad kidney stone recently and had to bite down on the stick and ride it out because I can't afford to get it treated medically. I'm graduating in May, but am out here fighting. We want to make sure that conditions are improved for ourselves and the students that come after us."

The walkout has won broad support on campus and many undergraduate students and members have voiced their support for the strike on social media.

However, NYU has made clear that it will accept nothing less than a full capitulation by graduate students on their key social demands. In an email sent to the NYU student and faculty body on Sunday, NYU president Andrew Hamilton and Provost Katherine Fleming, who make $2 million and $1 million per year respectively, denounced the strike as "misguided" and dismissed the demands by graduate students as "unreasonable."

The letter used the recent sell-out contracts at Harvard University, where graduate students ended up with a

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miserable $17/hour pay, and Columbia University, as the basis for rejecting the demand for higher wages by NYU graduate workers. At Columbia University, graduate students are voting until April 30 on a contract that amounts to a pay cut in the first year. It provides for a wage of just $17 per hour, significantly lower than the inadequate $20 per hour that NYU students already receive and that provoked their strike in the first place.

One of many Columbia graduate workers who are voting "no" on the proposed contract explained her decision on Twitter: "This is not a win… The raises included hardly cover union dues for next year, let alone improve our quality of life." She added, "our contract will likely set a precedent for what striking students at other schools will be able to win from their administrations (NYU workers are about to go on strike, for example. I don't intend to f*** them over.)"

Universities like NYU and Columbia, which are run by multi-millionaires and billionaires, are not only unwilling to make any concession, as part of the broader restructuring of class relations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, they seek to impose massive austerity on their workers.

In this, they can count on the full support of the UAW. The UAW has systematically isolated the struggles of Columbia graduate students, refusing to unite even with the fight of graduate students at NYU a few miles downtown, let alone broader sections of the working class. Then the UAW unilaterally ended the strike before trying to push a sellout deal down the throats of Columbia grad students.

This dynamic again became clear in the last bargaining session at NYU on Monday. GSOC-UAW again made several concessions, including dropping demands for a $1,000 housing stipend and a $500,000 emergency fund for graduate students. They also accepted that bargaining now proceed through a federal mediator. Before the strike had even begun, GSOC had lowered its demands from initially $48 an hour by a whole third to just $32 an hour.

However, NYU refused to accept their proposals on Monday and said it could not continue bargaining until Thursday. In other words, the university is taking an intransigent line, counting on the union retreating on one demand after another.

Moreover, from the first day of the strike, the union has sought to promote the Democratic Party, inviting Dianne Morales, a Democratic candidate for the New York City mayoral election who was just officially endorsed by the UAW, to the picket line.

GSOC-UAW also continuously promotes identity politics around demands for protection against sexual and what they call "power-based" harassment. In bargaining meetings, the dropping of key social demands by the union is routinely either preceded or followed by extensive discussion of their demands on "equity and inclusion."

In previous graduate student struggles, especially at the University of Michigan last fall, such demands being "met" by the university served as the pretext for ending the strike, under conditions where all the major social demands of graduate students were betrayed. Above all, the promotion of the Democratic Party and identity politics serves to divert from the fundamental political and class issues that graduate students are facing.

How closely the situation of graduate students is bound up with the broader social crisis was indicated by a tweet of an international NYU student. Referencing the horrific state of the pandemic in India, he tweeted, "Solidarity with fellow #internationalstudents from India at NYU. unraveling in the face of unimaginable horrors at home, while preparing to strike against an institution that won't give us a livable wage in this expensive city."

To successfully carry forward their struggle grad students must break free from the confines of capitalist politics and the unions. As the struggle at NYU and Columbia demonstrates, the fight against austerity and to put an end to the pandemic requires new organizations, independent from the unions and both big business political parties and based on a socialist and internationalist perspective.

We urge graduate students at NYU and Columbia University, and all those who support their struggle, to study the statement by the International Committee of the Fourth International calling for the formation of an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees and to sign up for the May Day rally this Saturday.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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