

NYU seeks to break graduate student strike as many Columbia graduate students vote “no” on sell-out contract

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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. Eastern time. We encourage graduate students, undergraduates and workers from the New York City area to attend.

Two major graduate struggles are unfolding just six miles from one another in New York City. Some 2,000 graduate students at New York University (NYU) are entering their third day of a strike for higher wages and better health care, just as many graduate students at Columbia University (CU) are deciding to vote “no” on a contract that would result in a pay cut for them in the first year.

Administrations at both schools have taken an intransigent position in the negotiations and employed ruthless tactics against the students aimed at breaking the strikes. At Columbia, the university docked workers’ pay during the strike in order to impose economic pressure.

On Monday, NYU president Andrew Hamilton, who takes home about \$2 million every year, sent an email to the parents of striking graduate students as well as undergraduates on Monday in a blatant attempt to break the strike. Calling the strike “unwarranted, untimely, and regrettable,” he threatened again that NYU will do everything it can to minimize the impact of the strike.

Both universities are run by multi-millionaires and billionaires and maintain close ties to the American state and the Democratic Party. In line with the policy of the entire ruling class, they see the contract negotiations as an opportunity to impose austerity on the workforce.

The strike at NYU comes just days before the finals period begins. Most of the grading in classes is done not by professors, but by their graduate teaching and course assistants (TAs).

Unsurprisingly, the NYU administration has been referencing the sell-out deals arranged by the UAW at both

Columbia and Harvard University as a basis for their arguments. Despite the fact that graduate workers at all of these universities are earning poverty wages, they claim that NYU graduate students are still better off than others and cannot expect a wage increase.

Hamilton’s email has provoked as much anger as ridicule among graduate students, their parents as well as undergraduates and faculty. One graduate student tweeted: “The ONLY place NYU has my mom’s email is as one of two emergency contacts. I’m furious.”

An NYU undergraduate tweeted, addressing the NYU administration, “[Yo]u charge the money [yo]u do and then play stocks and sh** with that money instead of actually using it for the things students pay for.” NYU’s chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) issued a statement “strongly” advocating “that faculty resist any call to substitute their own labor for that of their TAs in the matter of grading or teaching.”

These expressions of support and the scorn at the NYU administration, which is universally seen as engaging in blatant self-enrichment at the expense of both the employees and the students of the university, are indicative of the broader social anger that underlies the strike.

However, this is also precisely why the union, working closely together with the Democratic Party, is seeking to isolate the struggles of graduate students from broader sections of the working class, while preparing to sell them out.

The Graduate Student Organizing Committee (GSOC), affiliated with the United Auto Workers union (UAW), has lowered the demands for wage compensation by a whole third, from \$48/h to \$32/h. In the last bargaining session, the union again dropped demands, while agreeing to bring in a federal mediator. At Columbia University and many other recent workers’ struggles, federal mediators have been brought in to arrange contracts in favor of corporate management.

There is significant anger over the role the union is playing in undermining the struggles among graduate students at both NYU and Columbia. The UAW is actively seeking to separate the workers at NYU from the workers at Columbia, despite the fact that they are part of the same amalgamated UAW Local 2110.

An NYU graduate student spoke to an International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) member about the call to build new forms of organization independent from the unions and both political parties, as well as the need for a class perspective.

“I agree with the *World Socialist Web Site*’s position and think other forms of organizing are necessary. I know the members of GSOC are attempting to fight in good faith, but are afraid of UAW leadership and have been pressured heavily by them.” The student also added, “I appreciate you doing the only reporting on the corruption of trade unions in the USA. Thank you for your bravery in covering this issue!”

At Columbia University, there are reports that entire departments are voting “no” on the contract that the UAW has negotiated. Moreover, the vote itself has already been delegitimized in the eyes of many graduate students.

On Friday, three days into the voting period for the tentative agreement at Columbia—which ends on April 30 at 5 p.m.—the bargaining committee (BC) of the Graduate Workers at Columbia (GWC)-UAW emailed the graduate worker unit, announcing there was a “typographical error correction in tentative agreement.” The change affected PhD workers beyond their guaranteed years of funding in year one of the contract who were previously guaranteed a five percent increase. This was now “corrected” to a three percent increase. As expected, the BC, which has done everything to suppress opposition to the UAW, went along with the altering of the contract language during the vote.

The experience of Columbia University has not been lost on NYU graduate students, many of whom have expressed concern that the NYU strike would become a repeat of the Columbia experience.

With the UAW increasingly discredited, the Democratic Party, and its pseudo-left appendage, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), are heavily intervening in the NYU strike to prop up the union and tie graduate students to capitalist politics.

At NYU, GSOC-UAW is closely affiliated with the DSA. The union invited Dianne Morales, a Democratic candidate in the New York City mayoral election, to the picket line on the first day of the strike. The UAW had just officially endorsed her in the election. Several other Democratic Party figures have tweeted about the strike as well, cynically using it as a means to bolster their election campaigns.

The DSA, which functions as a faction within the Democratic Party, has also intervened from day one. Eric Blanc, who is an NYU graduate student in sociology, a member of the DSA and prominent writer for *Jacobin Magazine*, has been promoting GSOC-UAW on Twitter, while arguing against a break from the Democratic Party.

On Tuesday, following tweets from the NYU picket line, Blanc tweeted, “The strategic starting point for socialists is how to build working-class power, not how to split from the Democratic Party as soon as possible.”

In reality, any genuine struggle for the development of working class power requires complete independence from the Democratic Party, which is one of the oldest capitalist parties in the world, and responsible for countless crimes of US imperialism at home and abroad.

Blanc’s intervention at NYU doesn’t come out of the blue. Over the past weeks, Blanc has denounced the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the WSWS for its exposure of the right-wing record of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who recently attacked genuine socialists for opposing the Biden administration. The exposures have struck a deep chord among many left-wing youth and workers and triggered a crisis within the Democratic Party establishment.

In 2019, Blanc authored the book *Red State Revolt* on the teachers’ strikes in 2018, which developed into a rebellion against the trade unions. The DSA intervened aggressively to stifle this rebellion politically and tie workers to Democratic Party politics and the unions.

The same goal also animates the DSA’s intervention in the NYU strike, which is developing under far more explosive social and political conditions in the US and internationally.

The IYSSE and WSWS are advancing an entirely different perspective. We are fighting for the orientation of graduate students toward the international working class and principled, Marxist politics, independent from the Democratic Party and trade unions. To learn more about a socialist strategy to put an end to the pandemic and capitalism, we encourage graduate students to join the International May Day rally this upcoming Saturday.



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