

Bernie Sanders intervenes in NYU graduate student strike as UAW prepares sell-out

Clara Weiss, John Conrad
30 April 2021

The strike of 2,000 New York University (NYU) graduate students is nearing the end of its first week. As the United Auto Workers (UAW), with which the Graduate Student Organizing Committee (GSOC) is affiliated, is stepping up efforts to shut it down as quickly as possible, the Democratic Party is heavily intervening in the strike.

A vote at Columbia University on a sell-out contract negotiated by the UAW behind the backs of the membership is ending today, on April 30. Many graduate students are opting to vote no and there is widespread anxiety about a possible rigging of the vote, something for which the UAW is notorious. At NYU, finals are beginning next week, the UAW is clearly pushing to shut down the NYU strike as quickly as possible.

On Wednesday, NYU accepted the federal mediator, Todd Austin, that had been proposed by the GSOC Bargaining Committee (BC) after it had accepted NYU's offer of mediation on the first day of the strike. Prior to joining the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service (FMCS), Austin had been on staff of the 1199 SEIU union at Montefiore Medical Center, a hospital in the Bronx, where devastating cuts have been implemented with the help of the union.

At the bargaining session on Thursday, NYU predictably continued to take a hard line, refusing to respond to proposals from GSOC. The NYU administration is no less unwilling to make any concessions than Columbia University or any other employer. For these institutions, which represent the ruling class as a whole, the negotiation is an opportunity to further impose austerity. Their strategy is to wait for the union to drop one demand after another.

As always, the UAW did not disappoint the NYU administration. The UAW representative and president of Local 2110, Maida Rosenstein, has repeatedly pressed for a further dropping of demands, and suggested that only

one more membership meeting be held. She stressed that this should be done as fast as possible, "The turnaround needs to be fast, because people are on strike, and that's a concern."

By the end of the day, GSOC accepted the NYU proposal for a health care fund to cover out of pocket costs. While NYU had proposed \$200,000 to cover out-of-pocket costs, which would amount to less than \$100 per unit member per year, GSOC now asked for a fund of \$500,000 to be raised to \$1 million by the end of the contract.

Members of the BC also stressed that bargaining should proceed as swiftly as possible in order to avoid a continuation of the strike. Notably, one BC member advocated lowering of demands that very day pointing, as a reason, to the scheduled virtual appearance of Democratic Senator Bernie Sanders on the picket line on Friday.

In fact, GSOC has done everything to involve Democrats in the strike, above all the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), a pseudo-left faction within the Democratic Party.

From day one of the strike, GSOC-UAW invited Democratic Party representatives to the picket line to cheer on the union. The picket line has become a red carpet for various Democratic Party politicians running for city council and other positions, as well as members of various pseudo-left organizations. On Friday, Bernie Sanders is set to virtually address GSOC on the picket line.

The same Democratic Party that dominates NYU's Board of Trustees of multi-millionaires and billionaires, that are pushing for concessions from the graduate students, is now pretending to be on the side of the striking graduate students.

On Tuesday, Sanders had tweeted: "I stand in solidarity with @GSOCUAW graduate workers at NYU who are on

strike for living wages, affordable health care, and decent working conditions. We are fighting for college for all and dignity for the workers who make our universities great.” Graduate students should ask themselves: What is really behind the intervention of Sanders, one of the most experienced bourgeois politicians in the US, in this strike?

The Democratic Party, one of the oldest capitalist parties in the world, has overseen decades of social austerity and imperialist wars. In the US, major cities like Chicago, Los Angeles and New York City, all Democratic-ruled, are the sites of a staggering social catastrophe. In New York City, more people have become unemployed on average than in any other major city in the US due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with at least 630,000 jobs destroyed. Over 1.6 million rely on food stamps.

A Democratic governor, Andrew Cuomo, and a Democratic mayor, Bill de Blasio, have overseen a devastating spread of the pandemic in New York state which was long the center of the pandemic in the US. So far, the pandemic has claimed the lives of over 50,000 people in New York alone, many of them transit workers and health care workers who were denied essential protective equipment while battling the virus in overburdened hospitals.

The Democratic administration of Joe Biden, which “left” Democrats like Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez promote on a daily basis, has continued and expanded the Trump administration’s war preparations against China and is also continuing its brutal policy against desperate immigrants fleeing violence and poverty on the US-Mexican border.

If Bernie Sanders is now intervening in the strike, it is above all to politically prepare its sell-out and to stifle any opposition from graduate students to the union and capitalist politics more broadly. They lend their support not to the graduate students and their struggle but to the union which is scrambling to contain growing working class opposition, including among auto workers, teachers and oil workers.

In fact, the intervention of Sanders in the strike, much like the appearance of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez at the picket line of the striking Hunts Point workers in January, is a sign that preparations for the sell-out of the strike are very well advanced.

The NYU strike is taking place amidst an enormous radicalization of the working class internationally. One year into the pandemic, which has exposed the failure of the capitalist system to provide for even the most minimal necessities of life—and life itself—workers and young

people are not only traumatized but also angry.

The graduate student strikes at NYU and Columbia are part of a much broader upsurge of struggles of the working class and a turn to the left by broad sections of the population. In the US, this found an expression most recently in the response to the exposure of the WSW and SEP of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s right-wing political record and her denunciations of socialist opponents of the Biden administration.

This is why the Democratic Party, working in cahoots with the union, is so concerned with shutting down this strike and preventing graduate students from turning to a genuinely Marxist perspective. By contrast, the IYSSE is intervening in this struggle precisely to fight for such a Marxist orientation and the building of a genuinely socialist leadership.

Graduate students must not rely on capitalist politicians who are not on their side and instead turn to a mobilization of the entire working class, in New York, across the US and internationally. This means a conscious break not just from the union but from the pseudo-left politics of forces like Sanders and the DSA, which ultimately represent the interests of privileged layers of the upper middle class.

This is the only way to not just prevent another betrayal by the union, but, most importantly, to develop an offensive by the international working class to put an end to the pandemic and the capitalist system. Graduate students interested in this perspective should reach out to us and make plans to attend the May Day Rally of the International Committee of the Fourth International on Saturday.

To read more about the politics of the pseudo-left, study the WSWS topic page.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact