

Striking NYU graduate students: “It’s people’s lives that we’re talking about here”

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The strike of 2,000 New York University (NYU) graduate student-workers is nearing the end of its first week, and the strikers are determined to win higher wages and benefits and better working conditions. The NYU chapter of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) spoke to strikers on the picket line Thursday.

That same day, the efforts of the United Auto Workers (UAW) with which the Graduate Students Organizing Committee (GSOC) union is affiliated, to sell out the strike reached a new stage, with GSOC-UAW holding mediated bargaining sessions with the university, dropping demands and promoting Democratic Party politicians.

For the graduate students, the stakes are high. As one striking doctoral student told the IYSSE, “We’re literally talking about people’s lives.”

He explained, “I’ve personally been impacted by the past 10 months of bargaining, which are leading nowhere in terms of our contract—the raise that we’re asking for, just to literally be able to pay rent and buy food—and also by the pandemic. I’m an international student, and there was absolutely no help [from NYU] with my visa when I had visa problems. I don’t understand how we’re expected to work and offer the high quality of education that our students expect, rightfully so, when my life is constantly at stake, literally.

“Overnight, we woke up and they said F1 visas have to leave the country in the next four weeks. And I packed and moved out, and then they said, ‘Now you can stay,’ and then I unpacked, but then they said, ‘Only if it’s in-person [education] and not virtual,’ and so I packed my stuff again.

“So I’m in this constant state of terror that anything will happen and I have to leave, and this impacts not

only my well-being, but it impacts my entire life here. I’ve been here for six years. This is just one little personal story as to why this is important. People don’t understand that it’s humans and lives that we’re talking about here. We’re literally talking about people’s lives.”

Indicating the broad support for striking graduate workers, he relayed his students’ response when he told them why he was on strike. “When I explained to them things like after 10 months of bargaining, we were only given a \$1 raise, they could not believe that, especially because these are people paying \$50,000-60,000 of tuition a year. And they’re like, ‘Wait, what? So I, as a student, have a better life than you, as my teacher? How are you paying rent?’ And then you start telling them, do you know how many of your teachers ended up being homeless during the pandemic in our department? They had no idea that *their* teachers were homeless.

“Many of them actually started talking to their parents, saying, ‘You need to know where you’re putting your money. This is the institution you are paying, and people are not being paid doing the job they’re supposed to be doing.’”

A Master’s student in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences explained that his reasons for striking were similar. “NYU has not recognized our needs for living in New York City. Master’s students already pay really expensive tuition. Then our hourly wage and monthly salary are not enough for us to even pay the rent. That’s why we’re striking.

“After the pandemic hit, everything has been so chaotic. For us TAs [teaching assistants], we have had a greater burden to adapt to and change our workflow for the online learning experience. It increased our workload—daily.”

The Master's student expressed solidarity with the graduate student-workers at Columbia University, who will finish voting on a tentative agreement Friday at 5:00 p.m. amid intense opposition to the UAW-promoted sell-out contract. "We're fighting for the same goal, and we have the same perspective for what we need and what we should have, considering what we have to offer to these institutes."

There was a discussion with this student about the social devastation that resulted from the pandemic for workers, while billionaires saw their wealth soar, and the need to unify working class struggles. He said, "I think you're making a really great point. After the pandemic and after the end of our former contract, we graduates here realized how graduate workers and so many other workers in America are living in a grey area—we're part-time workers."

"So NYU has so many tricks and so many excuses to treat us differently from faculty and from other workers in this institute. This strike is going to let more people realize that graduate workers are workers, and we deserve a living wage."

Another Ph.D. student explained that health care costs are a central issue in the strike. "I have colleagues who are paying so much money out of pocket," he said. "The current deductible is about one-sixth of the Ph.D. student's salary—\$5,000. That's a lot of money to be paying out of pocket. We had one testimonial from a student with Crohn's who had racked up hundreds and hundreds of thousands of dollars of accrued expenses. Of course, insurance covers a lot of it, but to take a drug literally developed by NYU, which means by grad student labor ..."

He told the IYSSE that he has been heartened by "being on strike on the picket line in front of the park [and] having trucks drive by, having tradesmen drive by, and seeing them supporting it [by honking their horns]. It shows that this isn't an isolated struggle."

Another striking student told the IYSSE, "Right now we're not paid a living wage, and as an international student I constantly have to deal with the legal and tax issues. We also don't have a full health care program and health care package, so many of our workers are forced to take out loans even to pay just to pay for their health care. And we're fighting for more support for workers with families."

"We're definitely in solidarity with our brothers and

sisters uptown [at Columbia]. We don't know what's going to happen with the federal mediator, but it feels like the university hasn't been listening to us at all."

The efforts of the UAW to isolate the struggles at NYU and Columbia and sell them both out demonstrate the need for a new perspective and leadership among graduate workers to orient them toward the working class as a whole, which is coming into struggle against the COVID-19 pandemic and attacks on living standards. Students and workers in the New York City area and more broadly should attend Saturday's International May Day Online Rally to learn more about the way forward.



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