

Columbia graduate workers defy UAW, vote down sellout contract

Genevieve Leigh
30 April 2021

On Friday evening, graduate workers at Columbia University officially rejected the concessionary Tentative Agreement (TA) endorsed by their union, the Graduate Workers of Columbia (GWC) affiliated with the United Auto Workers union (UAW). The results were 970 “yes” votes to approve the contract to 1,093 “no” to reject the contract. The union reported that 62 percent of eligible voters in the unit cast a ballot.

The vote is a devastating blow to the UAW and the majority of the GWC Bargaining Committee who ferociously endorsed the contract despite overwhelming opposition from the rank and file. Union officials, shocked and furious at the vote tally, were silent for one long minute after the results were revealed in a general body meeting called for 5:00 p.m. After their initial shock wore off, the UAW officials ended the call without any discussion. Rank-and-file members cheered on the results in the chat and called for the immediate resignation of the Bargaining Committee.

The sellout contract did not come close to meeting any of the graduate student workers’ original demands, including increased wages, child care, dental, third party arbitration and summer stipends. The three-year tentative contract also included a “no-strike clause” and guaranteed the deduction of two percent of their wages for union dues payments to the UAW.

The courageous stand taken by rank-and-file workers in rejecting the contract, in the face of incredible pressure and intimidation from the UAW, is a critical step forward for CU workers and other education workers around the country and internationally. Their militancy is just one example of a growing mood of resistance to the homicidal policies of the ruling class by workers throughout the US and around the world.

However, student workers must be warned. While the immediate danger has passed, the struggle is far from

over.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) call on student workers to immediately recall the Bargaining Committee, oust the UAW officials and arrange a mass meeting to elect an independent strike committee to assume control of the struggle. The new strike committee must immediately resume the strike and link up their struggle with graduate students at New York University (NYU) who are in the middle of a strike over the same basic demands.

Most importantly, the independent strike committee must adopt a new political strategy. Control of the strike cannot be left in the hands of the UAW, whose interests are directly tied to the same corporations and political establishment that control Columbia University.

In order to succeed, the strike must be expanded into the working class. Graduate students should organize delegations to be dispatched to workplaces and factories in New York and beyond to explain their struggle to autoworkers, teachers, transit workers, hospital workers, retail workers and other sections of the working class.

The struggle of CU graduate workers is the same struggle as workers everywhere, who are all fighting against the deadly back-to-work campaign, and against “COVID-19 austerity,” that is, the implementation of major cuts to wages and jobs to pay back the trillions of dollars that the Democrats and Republicans handed over to corporate America and Wall Street at the start of the pandemic.

The fact that the CU strike continues to be met with a virtual media blackout is a stark indication that the ruling class sees immense potential for this strike to spark a much broader struggle—which is exactly what

is required.

At neighboring New York University, graduate students, who are part of the same UAW local, are striking over the same conditions. From the very beginning the UAW has directed all of its energies to keeping the two strikes isolated from each other and from the working class as a whole.

The Columbia and NYU UAW representative and president of Local 2110, Maida Rosenstein, has spent the last week repeatedly pressing for the demands of NYU graduate students to be dropped. In fact, early this week she 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.”

The Graduate Student Organizing Committee (GSOC), the union at NYU, has done everything to involve Democrats in the strike, including above all the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), a pseudo-left faction within the Democratic Party, in order to disorient and demobilize the strike. Democratic Senator Bernie Sanders spoke virtually to NYU graduate students on Friday for a whole four minutes, claiming blandly that he “appreciated” their struggle. Of course, no mention was made of the fact that it is his own party which dominates the school’s Board of Trustees.

The entire experience of the Columbia and NYU strikes once again raises the need not just for a strike but for the building of a political, socialist leadership in the working class for the revolutionary struggles that are ahead.

Columbia graduate students will find powerful allies in workers who are seething with anger and eager to fight for their lives and livelihoods.

On Friday, the same day as Columbia students rejected their sellout contract, nearly 3,000 workers at Volvo’s New River Valley heavy truck plant in Virginia, abruptly received instructions from the UAW Local 2069 leadership to quit their pickets and prepare to return to work. The UAW claimed it has reached a tentative agreement with the company. The union is seeking to shut down their strike, not only without a vote but without even releasing any details or highlights. Workers will reportedly not be sent details on the agreement for another two weeks.

The reality is that the UAW, along with every other major trade union in the US, has sold out one struggle

after another for decades. The experiences rank-and-file graduate workers have been through with the UAW in their first contract is not a fluke, but the rule.

To take only the most recent examples, these include: the isolation and betrayal of the strike at Mack Truck, a Volvo subsidiary, in which the UAW left Volvo Truck workers on the job at NRV until it was forced to idle only due to shortages, and the General Motors strike in 2019 where the union rammed through a contract that ratified plant closures and allowed for the expanded use of lower-paid temp workers.

Graduate workers must draw the necessary conclusions: The issues confronting graduate students are the same issues confronting workers all over the country and, in fact, around the world. Moreover, the forces they are combatting in the Democratic Party-controlled Board of Trustees and the corrupt UAW bureaucracy are the same class enemies workers are fighting in struggles throughout the country.

It is not to the Democrats and the union executives that students should turn, but to teachers, autoworkers, service workers, health care workers, young people and the entire working class. The strike must be expanded and transformed into a conscious political struggle against capitalism and for socialism.

Graduate students interested in this perspective should reach out to the *World Socialist Web Site* and make plans to attend the online May Day Rally tomorrow being organized by the International Committee of the Fourth International.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact