NYU graduate student strike enters second week as GSOC-UAW makes concessions

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A strike by New York University graduate students for higher wages, tuition waivers and better health care and protection for immigrant and international students has now entered its second week with the Graduate Student Organizing Committee (GSOC), affiliated with the United Auto Workers, already abandoning key demands.

It is apparent that the NYU administration is pressing for a full capitulation by the GSOC-UAW.

The university administration is clearly waiting for the end of the semester, which will be over next week at NYU, in the confident expectation that the GSOC-UAW will sell out on all the major demands advanced by students.

In one of its most significant concessions to date, on Monday the GSOC-UAW dropped the demand for unit erosion.

At NYU, many graduate students are employed on an hourly basis. Unlike what exists at many other universities, teaching is not part of the stipend that NYU Ph.D. students receive. In many departments NYU graduate students have a lower base stipend than at Columbia University, for instance (where teaching is tied to the stipend), and have to apply separately for teaching positions to get additional income. Stipends can be well below $30,000 a year and are usually disbursed for only 9 months.

Many positions were cut during the pandemic and graduate students struggled to obtain a job that allowed them to receive additional income. Therefore graduate students advanced the key demand that the bargaining unit not be reduced to under 90 percent of its 2018–2019 level. This was to prevent the university from trying to offset a contractual increase in wages by drastically reducing the number of positions that are available to graduate students. International students, in particular, are reliant on these university job offers since, due to visa restrictions, they are often not allowed to work off-campus or run into significant challenges doing so.

Nevertheless, on Monday, the GSOC-UAW unceremoniously dropped the demand to prevent unit erosion, even without a prior membership meeting. The union made several other concessions to the university, including accepting only 30-day notifications on changes to the student health plan "when practicable" for NYU and accepting NYU's proposal on the Dependent Premium Support Plan.

The bargaining committee also made clear that they are strongly considering dropping demands relating to health care and accepting NYU's paltry proposals, which fall far short of covering the enormous health care costs facing the vast majority of graduate workers. Improved health care, along with compensation and tuition waivers for master's degree students, has been consistently one of the top three demands of graduate students in polls.

At every step of the way, the bargaining committee has defended its concessions as "hard decisions" presumably necessary to get NYU to make "a move."

Both the constant concessions by the union and the hard line taken by the NYU administration fully confirm the warnings of the WSWS and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE). Just as at Columbia University and workplaces across the US, the ruling class is pushing to impose austerity with the assistance of the unions.

Just this past weekend the UAW forced striking Volvo truck drivers in New River, Virginia, back to work without allowing them to see the tentative agreement the union negotiated behind their backs.

At Columbia University, graduate students last Friday voted against a tentative agreement that had been negotiated by the UAW behind their backs. The agreement would have signified a de facto pay cut for the student workers. Since the union had scheduled the vote so that it coincided with the end of the semester, it is all

but impossible for most graduate students to immediately resume the strike now. While graduate students do teach courses over the summer, there are far fewer slots available than during a regular semester.

The mounting anger at the betrayals by the UAW expressed by auto workers and graduate students is part of a broader rebellion by workers against the pro-capitalist trade unions. The enormous hostility of workers to the unions' treacherous imposition of austerity has provoked considerable concern within the ruling class and the Democratic Party, in particular.

This is why, at NYU, the GSOC-UAW has invited various "left" figures within the Democratic Party, which dominates NYU's Board of Trustees of multi-billionaires and millionaires, to posture as defenders of the grad students and deflect anger from the union. Last week, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders professed his support for GSOC-UAW on both Twitter and in a four-minute call to the picket line. The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), a pseudo-left faction within the Democratic Party, has been aggressively campaigning on behalf of the union as well.

The Democratic Party and the unions are concerned not just with the situation at NYU, but the broader resurgence of the class struggle. Social tensions in New York City are particularly explosive. The city is home to 92 billionaires and Wall Street, but also a multi-million strong, heavily exploited working class.

This month, an agreement covering 100,000 New York City public employees is set to run out. The agreement temporarily prevented the layoff of up to 22,000 workers. On Monday, over 80,000 city workers were forced back to work in their offices despite the failure of authorities to contain the pandemic in the US or internationally.

On May 2, due to a news blackout, it was only reported for the first time that two-dozen oil workers in Brooklyn had been on strike since April 19. The workers voted in 2019 to unionize. Since then the Teamsters from Joint Council 16 have been negotiating with the company without any result.

The oil workers, some of whom earn as little as $16.63 per hour, are demanding higher wages, as well as pension and health care benefits. Throughout the pandemic, they have provided heating oil to New York City schools, hospitals, the MTA and gas stations. One of the strikers, John Thompson, told The City, "We were the ones that kept this thing running while everybody stayed home—and we can't get rewarded for that?" Three workers have already gotten replacement notices because of their participation in the strike.

The oil company is owned by John Catsimatidis, a leading Republican whose net worth is $2.8 billion. Catsimatidis also owns Gristedes Foods Inc., a company that sells its produce at Hunts Point Market where produce workers went on strike in January for higher wages. The strike was betrayed by the Teamsters who called in Democratic Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez just before they announced a sell-out contract.

The role of forces such as Ocasio-Cortez, Sanders and the DSA is to promote the illusion that both the Democratic Party, responsible for countless crimes of imperialism and decades of austerity, as well as the pro-capitalist unions can be pressured to the "left." By propping up the unions and promoting nationalist, opportunist politics, they seek to prevent a turn by workers and young people to a Marxist perspective and an internationalist, socialist program.

This, however, is precisely what is needed in order for these struggles to succeed. The *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality fight for the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File committees. Unlike the pro-capitalist unions, these committees will be completely independent from the ruling class and its agencies such as the Democratic Party and the unions. They will fight for a strategy to unite the working class internationally. At NYU and Columbia, such independent committees would immediately work to broaden the struggle of graduate students by rallying support from city workers, Amazon workers, public school teachers and broader sections of the working class.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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