

NYU graduate student strike set to enter its third week as union seeks to officially end strike at Columbia

Clara Weiss, John Conrad
7 May 2021

The strike by NYU graduate students is nearing the end of its second week and strikers are determined to continue into next week, when much of the final grading for the semester is scheduled to take place.

There are growing reports of systematic efforts by NYU to break the strike. The university is reportedly forcing professors and lecturers in many departments to do the job of their striking teaching and course assistants, threatening that they could otherwise be fired.

Meanwhile, at Columbia University, the Graduate Student Organization Committee, which is affiliated with the United Auto Workers, is holding a vote on officially ending their strike which was “paused” by the union after graduate students rejected a sell-out deal arranged by the UAW and the university administration.

The union had scheduled the vote in such a way as to make it coincide with the end of the semester, making it all but impossible for graduate students to immediately resume the strike. The members of the Bargaining Committee at Columbia have now resigned after a petition began circulating calling for their immediate recall.

Late Thursday night, NYU raised its offered increase of hourly wages from \$21.50 to \$25, beginning September 2020, with a following yearly raise of 2.5 percent, which is the equivalent of the projected inflation rate. Emboldened by the increase in NYU’s offer, graduate students are determined to continue the strike into next week. The union is asking for a raise to \$27, up to \$32 by the end of the contract. It has now accepted the six-year framework, including a no-strike clause, and has dropped most other demands, including

for waivers for 40 percent of tuition for Masters students and a higher minimum stipend.

This leaves Masters students, who, unlike PhD students, usually do not receive living stipends, with an average of well over \$50,000 in tuition per year, not counting living expenses in one of the most expensive cities in the world. The union has also dropped the demand for protection against an erosion of the unit, meaning that NYU can decide to offset any wage concessions it might make by limiting the numbers of positions available to graduate students. Unlike at other universities, most graduate stipends at NYU are not tied to teaching positions, so graduate students have to apply for teaching positions in order to obtain additional income.

Moreover, the wages negotiated are still far below a living wage in New York City, especially since graduate students are not allowed to work more than 20 hours per week and international students are often banned for legal reasons from working off campus.

The GSOC-UAW has presented NYU’s acknowledgement for their demands on “equity and inclusion”, above all the formation of a committee on power-based harassment, and crumbs that NYU is granting to cover out-of-pocket health care costs, as a “major win.” In reality, the demands on “equity and inclusion” cost NYU nothing but allow both the university and the union to divert attention among graduate students towards identity politics.

As for the health care fund, NYU has agreed to only \$300,000 in the first year, to be raised to \$500,000 by the end of the contract. Based on a survey conducted among its membership, the GSOC-UAW estimated that the median need of its 2,200 unit members would be

\$1.1 million and that the total need was \$2.4 million. In other words, even by the end of the contract, only a small portion of the out-of-pocket costs by graduate students will be covered.

There is no question that NYU has more than sufficient resources to meet all the social needs of not just its graduate employees, but all workers at the university.

NYU is a giant corporation that is beholden to Wall Street and the state apparatus. In 2020, it sat on a whopping \$27.84 billion in assets (up from \$23.1 billion in 2019). In 2021 NYU, including the NYU Langone Health hospital system, had an operating budget of \$13 billion. Its board of trustees is filled with multi-millionaires and billionaires from both the Democratic Party and the Republican Party, such as Larry Fink, who are directly implicated in the crimes of US imperialism and its war machinery.

This line-up of class forces at the university was made abundantly clear on Wednesday when NYU invited former Colombian president Alvaro Uribe to speak about a “sustainable Colombia.” The event occurred amidst a brutal state-led crackdown on mass protests against social inequality in Colombia, in which Uribe was directly implicated.

Uribe has a long history of funding far-right paramilitary squads that have terrorized political opponents and the poor in Colombia. A proven drug trafficker, Uribe has been a key ally in the US-led “war on terror” and was freed from house arrest just a few months ago with the approval of the Trump administration.

The UAW, which at every step of the way has been pushing for further concessions, is itself tied by a thousand threads to this same ruling class and the capitalist state.

Like other unions in the US and internationally, the UAW is run by highly-paid officials and sits on a staggering \$1.12 billion in assets. The blatant corruption of UAW officials like Dennis Williams, the union’s former president who is awaiting sentencing for corruption charges, is a stark expression of the conflict between the social interests of the union and those of the workers they claim to represent.

The strike at NYU is taking place amidst a growing rebellion internationally by workers against these rotten organizations. In Turkey, electricity workers recently

launched a wildcat strike in opposition to the union. In the US, teachers and auto workers have initiated wildcat strike actions to protest unsafe workplaces, coal miners in Alabama are battling both their union and the coal operators for living wages and safe working conditions, Virginia Volvo workers are fighting UAW-backed concessions, and striking nurses in Massachusetts are being isolated and betrayed by the Massachusetts Nurses Association.

This broader social and political context explains why at NYU the union has systematically brought in the same Democratic Party that dominates the university’s board of trustees and is responsible for the social catastrophe in New York onto the picket line. The union has also worked particularly closely with the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), a pseudo-left faction of the Democratic Party.

The way forward for the strike lies in establishing graduate students’ complete independence from both the UAW and the Democratic Party. This requires the formation of an independent strike committee to break through the union-imposed isolation and appeal to the broadest possible layers of workers across New York City and around the world for a common struggle.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact