

UAW moves to end NYU strike with deal that ignores most of grad students' demands

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With the strike by 2,000 New York University graduate student workers in its third week, the Graduate Student Organizing Committee (GSOC), which is affiliated with the United Auto Workers (UAW) union, is preparing to shut down the strike with a tentative agreement, which they claim is a “huge win.” In fact, the labor agreement will cost NYU virtually nothing and fails to address the most critical demands for substantial improvements in wages, health care and child care benefits.

On Thursday, the Graduate Workers of Columbia, also affiliated with the UAW, announced that it had pushed through a 771-323 vote to officially end the strike by 3,000 Columbia University students, which began on March 15, without attaining a first contract with university officials. On April 7, the UAW insisted on a “pause” in the strike and then attempted to push through a deal that would have resulted in a de facto pay cut for students. Columbia students rejected the sellout by a vote of 1,093 to 970.

In the hope of reaching an agreement with NYU Wednesday night, the GSOC-UAW eventually dropped the demand “NYPD off campus,” only asking that NYPD officers be required to wear masks in NYU buildings, that is, that they comply with state guidelines. This, as well as health care premiums, which will mostly affect masters' students, were reportedly the only two outstanding issues for NYU and GSOC-UAW negotiators. No agreement was reached by the early hours of Thursday and negotiations are scheduled to resume at 10 a.m. Friday.

Although there was widespread support for a common struggle with other grad student workers, the UAW deliberately delayed the strike so it would not coincide with the walkout by Columbia grad students. Even before the strike started, the GSOC-UAW had lowered the initial demand of a living hourly wage of \$48/hour to just \$32/hour—in opposition to a vote by the rank and file. For most of the negotiations, the UAW dropped one demand after another, including that for tuition waivers for masters' students.

Now, it is celebrating a one-time raise of the hourly wage

from \$20 to \$26/hour, and then up to \$30/hour by 2025-26 as a “huge win.” This is an exercise in duplicity. The wages are barely enough to live on in New York City, one of the most expensive cities on the planet, and less than what graduate students demanded. On top of that, the new hourly wage rates will apply to only a small portion of the graduate student body.

A significant number of graduate students, especially PhD students who predominantly work in teaching positions, will not see this raise at all. Their stipends—as low as \$28,000 per year and paid out for only nine months—along with their income from teaching, fall under a different clause. Rather than being covered by the hourly wage agreement, their compensation is subject to an annual percentage increase that is set in an “appendix” to the contract.

GSOC-UAW has agreed to a raise of just 3 percent per year until 2026 with two years of only 2.75 percent increases (down from the initial demand of 3.5 percent). The rate of inflation jumped over 4 percent last month and living expenses are expected to continue to rise in large part due to the runaway speculation on the financial and commodity markets, fueled by the government bailouts of Wall Street.

GSOC-UAW also dropped the demand to prevent layoffs and other staff cutbacks. NYU will be free to cut positions, as it has done during the pandemic, when many graduate students unsuccessfully applied for teaching and grading positions to get additional income. In the end, NYU can compensate for any increases in labor costs by eliminating positions.

GSOC-UAW also agreed to a health care fund by NYU to cover out-of-pocket costs of just \$300,000 in the first year, going up to \$500,000 in the last year of the contract. The union itself estimated that its membership needed about \$2.4 million per year to cover out-of-pocket costs, several times more than what NYU will cover.

For international students, NYU agreed to set up a tax and legal assistance fund of \$10,000 a year, to be raised to \$20,000 by the end of the contract. This is but a portion of the \$56,500 in annual tuition that NYU charges a single

undergraduate every year. The average hourly rate of an immigration lawyer in New York ranges from \$150 to \$300 and a single deportation case can cost up to \$10,000.

While NYU has agreed to not let “representatives of governmental agencies” into NYU buildings “for the purpose of targeting members of the NYU community based on immigration status or for the purpose of detention or deportation,” this language, too, amounts to very little. It will not prevent federal agencies with a warrant or its many undercover agents from entering buildings and detaining immigrants.

Shutting down the strike at a point where grad students would still do all the grading for finals will also allow NYU to largely offset any of the costs of the walkout.

To present what amounts to crumbs from NYU, an institution that sits on a whopping \$28 billion in assets and is closely connected to the American state and Wall Street, as a “huge win” after a nearly three-week strike is a fraud. The sole purpose of such a cynical claim is to disorient graduate students and workers who have followed the strike, defuse opposition to the sellout and shore up the tattered credentials of the union.

The graduate student strike at NYU contains important political lessons for students and workers everywhere. Above all, it shows the political mechanisms which the corporate and financial elite, and the Democratic Party in particular, employ to tie workers and young people to the unions and capitalist politics.

After the Columbia graduate student strike, where the UAW initially tried—and failed—to ram through a contract that would have signified a pay cut for graduate students, and amid a growing rebellion by workers against the corporatist trade unions, GSOC-UAW was propped up by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), a pseudo-left faction of the Democratic Party.

The GSOC-UAW bargaining committee is closely tied to the DSA. From day one of the strike, they transformed the picket line into a platform for the same Democratic Party that dominates NYU’s Board of Trustees of multi-millionaires and billionaires, and has created conditions of a social catastrophe in New York. On day three of the strike, Bernie Sanders publicly stated his support for the GSOC-UAW union; two days later, he made a four-minute call to the picket line.

While NYU has been seeking to break the strike, including by threatening professors that they would be fired if they didn’t do the work for their striking teaching and course assistants, GSOC-UAW has created a completely unserious atmosphere on the picket line, with all major political questions being blacked out. Now, in the third week, they hope that graduate students are worn out.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) has consistently intervened to warn strikers about the role of the UAW and the Democrats, and encouraged grad students to form a rank-and-file strike committee to free their struggle from the organizational and political shackles of the corporatist unions and the capitalist Democratic Party. The IYSSE has urged all students who want to fight against social inequality and the dangers of fascism and war to take up a conscious *political struggle* to mobilize the working class in the New York area, the US and internationally to fight for genuine socialism.

This perspective has found a significant hearing among students and student workers. Speaking to WWSW reporters on Wednesday, a striking PhD student, who wished to remain anonymous due to his immigration status, emphasized the class issues at stake. He noted, “Academic workers have become precarious in a way that makes them develop a class consciousness that for structural reasons they did not have previously.” Pointing to social services, nurses and teachers, he added, “There is a feeling of desire for more resistance.” He pointed out that virtually every delivery truck that drove by the picket line in the last two weeks has honked in support. “There is a lot of solidarity coming from workers,” he noted.

It is not a coincidence the union has accepted a six-year contract with NYU that contains a no-strike clause. The ruling class and the unions are very aware that the pandemic has radicalized millions and created a social powder keg in the US and internationally. Mass protests in Colombia as well as growing strikes in the US and Europe are just the beginning of an upsurge in working class struggles.

On Friday, 3,000 nursing home workers are set to go on strike in Connecticut, just a hundred miles from New York City. In a sign of the enormous nervousness within the ruling class over the prospect of the strike triggering a much broader social explosion, the governor of the state has mobilized the National Guard in advance of the strike. These are the struggles, and this is the social force, that graduate students must turn to.

We urge NYU and Columbia students to join the IYSSE to take up the fight for international socialism and the global coordination of the rising resistance of the working class through the formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).



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