

UAW-GSOC ends NYU graduate student strike, fraudulently presenting it as a “historic victory”

International Youth and Students for Social Equality at New York University

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On Friday afternoon, the Graduate Student Organizing Committee (GSOC), which is affiliated with the United Auto Workers (UAW), officially ended the strike of over 2,000 New York University (NYU) graduate student workers. The workers were striking for living wages, health care coverage and better working conditions.

While the wording of the tentative agreement is still being worked out, the union moved quickly to shut down the strike in time for graduate students to be back on the clock during finals week at the university—that is, exactly when graduate student workers are most needed to complete grading. As a result, the actual impact of the strike on NYU will have been minimal.

The union is fraudulently presenting the outcome of the strike as a “historic victory.” It is nothing of the sort.

NYU, a giant corporation that sits on \$28 billion in assets, agreed to what amounts to crumbs thrown at its employees in exchange for a six-year contract with a no-strike clause.

The hourly wage, which is set to retrospectively be raised from \$20 to \$26 for 2020–2021, and then to \$30 by the end of the contract, not only fails to provide a living wage, falling far short of the \$48 per hour demanded by graduate students in the beginning. It will also apply to only a portion of graduate students who are working in hourly positions. Most teaching positions fall under a different clause in the contract.

Moreover, the union dropped the demand for “unit erosion” in the middle of the strike. This means that NYU will be allowed to simply cut positions for graduate students, which it has readily done during the pandemic, to save money.

The actual annual raise to the stipend and teaching income for most PhD students will be just three percent per year, less than the current inflation rate of over four percent. Inflation is projected to rise rapidly in the coming months and years, following the pumping of trillions of dollars into Wall Street.

The demand for tuition waivers for Master’s students was dropped entirely.

The health care fund by NYU will provide just \$300,000 to cover out of pocket costs in the first year and be raised to \$700,000 by the end of the contract. The estimated out-of-pocket costs of the 2,200 graduate students is \$2.4 million. The 95 percent coverage of health care premiums, which mostly affect Master’s students, also falls short of the full coverage that had been demanded.

The demand for “New York Police Department off campus” was substituted with a “health and safety committee” that will meet three times in the next six months, without any powers or consequences.

The fund for international and immigrant students will provide just \$10,000, to be raised to \$20,000 by the end of the contract. This is a fraction of what NYU charges a single one of its tens of thousands of undergraduate students in tuition every year. It will fall far short of the needs of international and immigrant students whose legal situations in the US have dramatically worsened in recent years.

A single deportation case in New York can cost up to \$10,000. The language about keeping “federal agencies” off campus to prevent detention and deportation will be of no consequence for ICE and NYPD officers with warrants or working under cover, a practice frequently adopted, especially in immigration raids.

Under conditions of a staggering social and political crisis, the terms negotiated by the deal provide the basis for an erosion, not a rise, in living standards. The no-strike clause for a staggering six years will mean that graduate students will encounter significant difficulties in fighting for better living conditions going forward.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) calls upon graduate students at NYU to reject this tentative agreement. The agreement not only fails to meet all the central demands of graduate students, but it will also tie their hands in the future, under conditions where millions of

workers are being radicalized and driven into struggle in the US and internationally.

In order to successfully develop their struggle, graduate students need new organizations and a new political perspective. Rank-and-file committees must be formed as part of the International Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. Such committees fight for demands that are determined, not by what universities and corporations falsely claim is “affordable,” but by what students and workers actually need.

Above all, they must be independent from the unions as well as the Democratic Party, and expand the struggle into the working class. Internationally, teachers, nurses, autoworkers, oil workers, and many other sections of the working class have begun to fight back against intolerable and unsafe working conditions in the pandemic and staggering levels of social inequality.

This is above all a political fight. The NYU Board of Trustees is dominated by a collection of millionaires and billionaires who are closely integrated into the American state machinery. Many are high-level operatives of the Democratic Party and the Republican Party.

The NYU administration represents a ruling class that seeks to impose austerity upon the working class and prepares for war, utilizing the corporatist unions such as the UAW to prevent open struggles by the working class whenever possible and sell them out whenever they cannot be suppressed. In this effort, the bourgeoisie increasingly relies upon fake-left forces like the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). This dynamic became abundantly clear in the course of the NYU strike.

After the brazen attempt by the UAW tried and failed to ram through a contract with a pay cut at Columbia University, and under conditions of a growing rebellion by workers against the unions, it fell upon the DSA to control and direct the strike at NYU into safe channels.

At NYU, little to no distinction can be made between the union and the DSA. The representative of the UAW Local 2110 at NYU, Patrick T. Shepherd, is a DSA member, and at least three of the nine bargaining committee members of GSOC are also affiliated with the DSA.

From the beginning, the GSOC-UAW worked to isolate the strike. The union leaders refused to call a strike authorization vote for months, despite significant support for a strike since the fall. In March, UAW Local 2110 President Maida D. Rosenstein explicitly argued against trying to make the strike coincide with the graduate student strike at Columbia University.

From day one, the GSOC-UAW transformed the picket line into a red carpet for Democratic Party politicians. Bernie Sanders intervened in the first week of the strike to

prop up GSOC-UAW. At the bargaining sessions, GSOC-UAW dropped one demand after another, always with the excuse that “very hard decisions” had to be made. On the picket line, the role of GSOC-UAW was cheered on and covered up every step of the way by the DSA and YDSA.

At the beginning of the strike, where many of the most significant concessions were made, the GSOC-UAW used demands around identity politics to divert from major economic concessions. When the GSOC-UAW prepared to drop the demand for tuition waivers, the YDSA chapter at NYU immediately announced a “tuition strike” for the fall, a maneuver that was immediately seized upon by the GSOC-UAW BC to argue that the fight for tuition waivers would continue in different ways.

At the same time, a completely unserious atmosphere was created with GSOC-UAW activists and leaders repeatedly referring to the picket as a “dance party.” Under conditions of a worldwide pandemic, where countless workers and also graduate students have lost and are losing loved ones, and are facing enormous psychological and social hardship, such an atmosphere could only alienate and wear down the majority of graduate students.

Contrary to what it claims, the DSA has nothing to do with socialist politics. It speaks for layers of the privileged middle-class and careerist elements who seek to advance within the union apparatuses, the Democratic Party, and the state. The central role of the DSA is both to prop up the unions as instruments to control the working class and to tie young people and workers who are looking for a way to fight for socialism to capitalist politics.

In opposition to the DSA, the IYSSE at NYU has consistently intervened in this strike, warning of the role of both the unions and the Democratic Party and fighting to orient graduate students to the working class and Marxist politics. We urge those who want to discuss this perspective with us to contact the IYSSE at NYU today.



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