

The role of the Academic Workers for a Democratic Union at Columbia and New York University

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Over the past two months, graduate workers at Columbia University and New York University (NYU) have engaged in determined struggles for improved working and living conditions.

Graduate students in New York City battled against powerful political forces, including the wealthy and politically connected elite universities and the corrupt United Auto Workers (UAW)—both heavily tied to big business and the state.

Throughout the Columbia and NYU strikes, the UAW, working with university administration and the Democratic Party, did everything in its power to sell out the graduate workers, including making concessions to the universities behind the backs of the rank-and-file, actively fighting to keep the two struggles from linking together, and starving the workers with a poverty strike wage.

The *World Socialist Web Site* warned students from the beginning of the strike that the UAW does not bargain on behalf of workers, but on behalf of the bosses. The WSWS continues to call for the formation of an independent strike committee, answerable to the rank-and-file, to turn out and mobilize broader sections of the working class.

There is growing support among graduate students for such a strategy. However, there is another political force that is seeking to block a break with the UAW and the Democratic Party: The Academic Workers for a Democratic Union (AWDU), a caucus within the union that promotes the lie that the UAW can be reformed.

The AWDU is active at both Columbia, where three AWDU members sat on the ten-person Bargaining Committee for the Graduate Workers of Columbia (GWC) union, and at NYU, where the entire Graduate Student Organizing Committee (GSOC) union Bargaining Committee is made up of AWDU members. The AWDU is also closely affiliated with the Democratic Socialists of America.

AWDU's role at Columbia and NYU

The Columbia AWDU's (C-AWDU) website states that their caucus believes “the role of the bargaining committee should be first and foremost to support and further rank and file interests and demands at the bargaining table” and in “hold[ing] bargaining committee members accountable.” It also calls for instantly recalling Bargaining Committee (BC) members “through a unit-wide vote if a sufficient number of unit members believe they have violated their commitments to representing the interests of our union.”

Many student workers may have been attracted to these seemingly principled demands. However, in reality, the role played by the members

of C-AWDU has not aligned with these statements.

Two weeks into the Columbia strike, the BC faced fierce opposition for attempting to propose a deal to the university behind the backs of the rank-and-file that conceded on major demands agreed to by the unit. In a general body meeting held just hours before the BC planned to make their sellout proposal, unit members spoke out strongly against the BC's anti-democratic measures and demanded that the bargaining committee conduct a poll of the entire unit.

One member on the call asked directly for a response from every member of the bargaining committee. All three members of the C-AWDU were silent as the UAW local assistant director argued that the rank-and-file demands were not winnable.

As things became more and more heated, a C-AWDU bargaining committee member ended the meeting without answering any of the questions posed, stating, “We don't know what we're doing yet. We have to take a caucus. I'm sorry, we're going to have to end this meeting.” She cynically added, “Your voice has been heard and umm we'll get back to you.”

The bargaining committee members then signed off of the meeting amid vocal opposition from students—“No more private meetings!” “Just take a vote!” “So we show up to bargaining and then watch you throw the contract in the toilet.”

A poll was conducted that showed overwhelming opposition to the bargaining committee's proposal and that 96 percent of strikers wanted to continue the strike. Within a week, in direct opposition to the will of the members, the bargaining committee put forward their sellout proposal to CU. When CU rejected it, the bargaining committee agreed to “pause” the strike in exchange for third party mediation without consulting the rank and file. It is noteworthy that there was no organized campaign by the C-AWDU at the time to oppose this sellout tactic and repudiate the bargaining committee. Two weeks later, the bargaining committee accepted a Tentative Agreement (TA) which amounted to a de facto pay cut for graduate workers in the first year of the contract.

In a general body meeting announcing the tentative agreement, GWC members were greeted with a new meeting format that prevented them from unmuting themselves or communicating with each other in the chat. The three C-AWDU members all had a chance to speak in opposition to the format at the meeting, but not one of them addressed the anti-democratic measure.

The C-AWDU bargaining committee members eventually came out in nominal opposition to the contract, yet they repeatedly made clear to the membership, at multiple points in the meeting, that the “official” recommendation from the bargaining committee was to accept the agreement. Contrary to the claims of the C-AWDU website, no call was put forward by them for a recall of the bargaining committee members

who acted behind the backs of the workers. Furthermore, C-AWDU's website stated that "a No vote is far from cost-free: it would mean many more hours of organizing, negotiating, and possibly striking in the future for a better contract."

As one graduate student told the WSWS, "I am increasingly convinced that the three reform caucus [bargaining committee] members are just there to play 'good cop'—the other seven members 'bad cop.'"

The claims by the AWDU caucus at Columbia that they, contrary to other union representatives, would genuinely fight for the interests of graduate students are proven to be fraudulent by the experience of the graduate student strike at NYU. There, the entire bargaining committee of the Graduate Student Organizing Committee is part of the AWDU. Yet, while the tentative agreement has been fraudulently proclaimed as a "historic victory," the essential role of the union has been the same.

First, the AWDU-led BC drew out the strike authorization process in order to prevent a situation in which both strikes were happening at the same time. Never did the union raise the demand for a linking up of the strikes despite being part of the same amalgamated union local. Then, before and since the strike began, the bargaining committee worked overtime to reduce every single fundamental demand from the rank and file.

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 the union. At the bargaining sessions, the 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.

By the time the Tentative Agreement was put forward, nearly every single grad student demand had been dropped or significantly reduced.

The six-year agreement with a no-strike clause is set to retrospectively enact wage increases from \$20 per hour to \$26 for 2020–2021, and then to \$30 by the end of the contract. Not only does this fail to provide a living wage in the most expensive city in the country, 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 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, which will be raised to \$700,000 by the end of the contract. The estimated out-of-pocket costs of the 2,200 graduate students are \$2.4 million. The demand for "New York Police Department off campus" was replaced by a "health and safety committee" that will meet three times in the next six months, without having any powers.

In short, the AWDU helped negotiate an agreement that will lead to the erosion of living standards, while granting the university six years in which graduate students are not allowed to fight for better conditions by going on strike.

It must be emphasized that the behavior of the AWDU BC members at Columbia and NYU is not simply a problem of bad individuals, but is bound up with the political perspective and historical origins of the AWDU itself.

Origins and history of the AWDU

The UAW long ago abandoned any association with the class struggle, and since the 1980s has been based on labor-management "partnership." In the name of making the corporations more competitive and profitable, the UAW suppressed strikes and helped transform autoworkers, once the highest paid industrial workers in the US, into the largely cheap labor and temporary workforce they are today.

Its role in academia is no different. Over the last decade, the UAW has expanded its "representation" to academic workers in order to bolster its dues income after its disastrous policies led to a collapse in membership from over 1.5 million in 1979 to just over 400,000 today. The same decade in which the UAW has entered and become active within academia has seen an assault on higher education, including mass layoffs and budget cuts, as well as a growth of social inequality more broadly.

It is within this context that the AWDU was formed in 2010 at the University of California (UC) as a "democratic reform caucus" within the UAW local graduate worker union. According to UC-AWDU's now defunct website, its founding goal was to transform their local UAW "into a grass-roots, democratic union run from the bottom-up." In reality, its main purpose has been to politically stifle and redirect opposition to the union back into safe channels.

After a sellout UC contract was passed in 2010 that gave graduate students a pay raise (2 percent) less than the rate of inflation, UC-AWDU led a contract campaign in 2013. This "successful" campaign boasted winning meager wage increases, the extension of paid parental leave from four to six weeks, and several cosmetic changes that cost the university nothing.

At NYU, the AWDU was established during contract negotiations in 2014, and won a majority of positions on the bargaining committee. Subsequently, this AWDU-led BC capitulated to the university, pushing back a strike deadline to the following semester despite the rank-and-file's overwhelming desire to strike against NYU. Then the bargaining committee accepted a meager contract just hours before the 2015 Spring strike was set to begin.

At every turn, the AWDU has functioned to redirect, and therefore disarm, widespread rank-and-file opposition to the actions of the UAW, back into support for the UAW by promoting illusions in reforming the very organization that has consistently betrayed workers.

The AWDU's name and politics are closely tied to the Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU). The TDU originated in the mid-70s, as the trade unions began a protracted process of degeneration and transformation into instruments of the corporations and the government. On the second day of the Columbia strike, C-AWDU held a digital teach-in with Kim Moody, a central figure of the TDU.

The TDU was only one of several movements in the 1970s ostensibly aimed at reforming American trade unions, which coalesced around the Labor Notes publication, founded by an organization called the International Socialists (IS). The IS emerged in 1962 out of the rightwing Socialist Party of America, led by Max Shachtman, a former American Trotskyist who moved sharply to right after breaking with the Fourth International in 1940.

The WSWS has extensively documented the role played by reform groups like the TDU since the 1970s. The critical analysis, "What is the Teamsters for a Democratic Union?" explains:

It must be plainly stated that the balance sheet for TDU and other union reform efforts is catastrophic—if success were measured by results for workers. In major industries where these so-called reformers played significant or leading roles—trucking, coal, steel, auto, telecommunications and public transit—millions of jobs have been lost since the 1970s, and wages, benefits, and worker safety have been rolled back decades. Truckers and delivery drivers

today haul more and are paid less than in the 1970s. Their crucial importance to the economy, which would grind to a halt without them, is rewarded with constantly increasing exploitation.

The analysis goes on to explain that the problem with the reform efforts was never a lack of courage among rank-and-file members. Instead, the problem lay in the perspective itself. The orientation of these reform groups has been to the bureaucracy, never the working class, always seeking to discover (or invent) a “progressive” or “democratic” faction of the trade union bureaucracy. Underlying this perspective, above all, was a bitter hostility to socialist politics.

Why trade unions cannot be reformed

It has been decades since the trade unions have been associated in any way with the defense of workers’ interests against the corporations and the ruling class. As the global hegemonic position of the US began to falter in the aftermath of World War II, the ruling class shifted from a policy of limited social reform to social counter-revolution, utilizing the methods of plant closures, union-busting and labor frame-ups.

The 1993 document, *The Globalization of Capitalist Production and the International Tasks of the Working Class*, by the Workers League (the predecessor to the Socialist Equality Party) explained the effects of globalization on the pro-capitalist and nationalist program of the trade unions:

The basic orientation of the old labor organizations—the protection of national industry and the national labor market—is undermined by globally integrated production and the unprecedented mobility of capital. The role of these bureaucratic apparatuses in every country has been transformed from pressuring the employers and the state for concessions to the workers, to pressuring the workers for concessions to the employers so as to attract capital.

The ruthless shutdown of the PATCO air traffic controllers strike in 1981, in which 11,000 air traffic controllers were fired by the Reagan administration, marked a nodal point in the transformation of the trade unions into the structures of corporate management.

The struggle by the PATCO workers was isolated and betrayed by the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, which refused to mobilize its millions of members in a broader struggle despite persistent calls among workers for a general strike. The unions proceeded to isolate, suppress and defeat a series of struggles during the 1980s while integrating themselves ever more directly into the framework of corporate management.

Throughout the 1980s, the unions ever more openly adopted the policy of “corporatism,” based on the supposed identity of the interests of management and labor through the integration of the government with the corporations and the unions, based on defense of capitalism and the nation-state.

By 1995, the portion of American workers in unions had fallen to 13 percent overall and 10.4 in the private sector, a staggering decline compared to 1958, when one-third of all American workers were unionized. Strikes, which had once been a common feature of American life, virtually disappeared. In 1995, there were only 34 work stoppages involving 1,000 workers or more in the US, compared to 187 in 1980 and

424 in 1974.

The artificial suppression of the class struggle corresponded with an increase in social inequality to levels not seen since the 1920s. Between 1978 and 2017, according to the EPI, CEO compensation rose in the US by 1,070 percent. The typical worker’s compensation over these 39 years rose by a mere 11.2 percent.

Soaring inequality and increasingly dire working conditions have been the direct result of the integration of the union apparatus into the corporations and the state. This has been an international phenomenon. Countless union betrayals of the working class, internationally, over the last four decades have confirmed the correctness of this analysis.

If a substantial faction of the ruling class, represented in the Biden administration, a section of the Democratic Party, and even elements in the Republican Party, have now turned to bolstering the unions, it is because they see them as critical tools for controlling, and suppressing the class struggle.

There is particular concern over the political radicalization of workers in the context of the ruling class’ criminal response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has thrown millions of workers into dire straits. The response from Trump and the forces he represents is to turn ever more directly to authoritarian forms of rule. The Democrats, on the other hand, are attempting to smother social opposition by utilizing the unions.

So worried is the ruling class over the threat of working class struggles, that President Biden, in an unprecedented action, actively intervened in the Amazon worker unionization effort in Bessemer, Alabama, urging workers to unionize. The top-down effort to unionize Amazon workers failed miserably, attesting to the last forty years of experience workers have had with the trade unions.

The very fact that Biden, a pillar of capitalist reaction for over 50 years, intervened so forcefully in the Bessemer vote exposes the claims that the efforts to unionize new layers of workers—Amazon and graduate students alike—have anything to do with the interests of the workers themselves.

Amidst growing hostility to the unions and the Democratic Party by broad sections of workers and youth, the AWDU and its supporters in the pseudo-left, above all the Democratic Socialists of America, are playing a critical role. They are engaged in a concerted effort to convince workers that these organizations of the ruling class can be pressured into serving the interests of the working class.

The AWDU is tied to a network of such pseudo-left organizations, which are closely connected to the Democratic Party, above all the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), which works as a faction within the Democratic Party. At NYU, the UAW representative and several members of the bargaining committee are members of the DSA.

The AWDU parallels the formation of the Unite All Workers for Democracy faction of the UAW (UAWD), initiated with the support of the DSA and other pseudo-left groups in the wake of the corruption scandal that has roiled the auto union. The role of the UAWD has been to promote the illusion that the UAW can be reformed by mandating the direct election of International officers instead of the current delegate system.

Underlying the efforts by the DSA to prop up the unions is an attempt to tie workers and youth to capitalist politics more broadly, above all the Democratic Party. Eric Blanc, who is an NYU graduate student in sociology, a member of the DSA and prominent writer for *Jacobin* magazine, has been promoting GSOC-UAW on Twitter, while explicitly arguing against a break from the Democratic Party. Blanc recently tweeted, “The strategic starting point for socialists is how to build working-class power, not how to split from the Democratic Party as soon as possible.”

In reality, any genuine struggle for the interests of the working class requires complete independence from the Democratic Party, which is one of the oldest capitalist parties in the world, and responsible for countless

crimes of US imperialism at home and abroad. Only on this basis can young people and workers turn to genuine socialist politics.

The way forward for graduate workers

In order for their struggle to move forward, graduate students must not only build new independent organizations of struggle, but these organizations must adopt a new political strategy, one that is based on the international working class and the independence from both capitalist parties.

The fight for living wages, affordable health care and housing, and high-quality education must be developed into a politically conscious effort to mobilize the working class in a counteroffensive against the capitalist system, which sacrifices every aspect of life, including life itself, for private profit.

The social basis for such a fight is the international working class. 2021 has already seen a powerful resurgence of the global class struggle, with recent strikes by coal miners in Alabama, autoworkers in Virginia, steelworkers in Pennsylvania, nurses in Massachusetts, oil workers in Texas and Brazil, airport workers in Germany, and electricity workers in Turkey.

This is the social force that graduate students must turn to in a struggle for socialism. As part of the ICFI, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), is fighting to build an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) equipped with a fighting Marxist perspective in opposition to the nationalist and anti-democratic trade unions staffed by wealthy pro-capitalist executives. We urge all students and workers who agree with this perspective to take up this fight and contact us today!



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact