

NYU graduate workers vote to ratify new contract

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On Monday, the Graduate Student Organizing Committee (GSOC) at New York University, which is affiliated with the United Auto Workers (UAW) union, announced the ratification of the new contract. Negotiations with the university ended last month after more than 10 months of bargaining and a three-week strike.

Of the total GSOC membership, between 2,000 and 2,200 graduate workers, 1,103 voted in favor of the proposed contract and 11 voted against (99 percent in favor). After an extension of the vote by another week, forced by low turnout, barely over 50 percent of the total GSOC membership had participated, just enough for GSOC leadership to claim that the contract had been ratified.

The union and the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) are celebrating the ratification and the new contract as a “historic victory” for graduate students. This is a fraud, designed to confuse not just graduate students at NYU but at other universities, and workers more broadly.

Under conditions of an unprecedented social, political and economic crisis, the new contract will mean an erosion of living standards for graduate student workers at NYU. From the standpoint of NYU, which holds over \$28 billion in assets, the minimal raises agreed to are nothing but crumbs. For graduate students, the minimal raises will be eaten up by the rapidly rising cost of living. Any further struggles will be made significantly more difficult by the six-year duration of the contract and the inclusion of a no-strike clause.

The hourly wage increase, from \$20 to \$26 for 2020-2021 and then to \$30 by the end of the contract in 2026, falls far short of providing a living wage to graduate students residing in one of the most expensive cities in the world. It will also only apply to a portion of

graduate students, those who are working in hourly positions. Most teaching positions fall under a different clause in the new contract.

The university will be able to offset any potential dent in its total assets because of the wage increase by cutting job positions for graduate students. This is made possible by the exclusion of the demand forbidding such unit erosion (the removal of graduate student positions), which was dropped by GSOC midway through the strike.

Under the new contract, the actual annual raise to the stipend and teaching income for most PhD students will be just 3 percent per year, far less than the current inflation rate of 5 percent.

The health care fund for graduate workers established by the new contract will provide just \$300,000 to cover out-of-pocket costs in the first year, rising to \$700,000 by the end of the contract. The estimated total out-of-pocket costs of the entire GSOC membership is \$2.4 million. The demand for tuition waivers for Masters’ students was dropped entirely.

The demand for “NYPD off campus” was also dropped by GSOC in favor of the establishment of a powerless “health and safety committee” that will meet three times over the next five years. The fund for international and immigrant students will provide just \$10,000, to be raised to \$20,000 by the end of the contract, a fraction of what NYU charges just one of its over 50,000 undergraduate students in tuition every year.

Important lessons are to be drawn from the experience of the NYU strike. Above all, it is an object lesson in pseudo-left politics.

One-and-a-half years into the pandemic, and over a year after the massive multi-trillion-dollar handout to Wall Street, the NYU strike occurred under conditions

of a growing radicalization and rebellion by workers against the trade unions. At Columbia University, graduate students rejected a sell-out contract that had been negotiated by the UAW against their opposition.

Most significantly, auto workers at Volvo have now twice rejected a sell-out contract in defiance of the UAW and are now back on strike. Recent weeks have also seen significant struggles by workers in Latin America and Sri Lanka. Many of these struggles have developed under the direct influence of the International Committee of the Fourth International and its affiliated Socialist Equality Parties (SEP).

Under these conditions, it fell to the Democratic Socialists of America, which completely dominates the GSOC-UAW at NYU, to work to contain the strike within the framework of the union and Democratic Party politics. Proposals to unite the NYU strike with that at Columbia were explicitly rejected by the UAW Local 2011 president Maida Rosenstein, with the support of the GSOC. No appeals whatsoever were made for support among the broad layers of the impoverished working class in New York, throughout the country and internationally.

On the contrary, GSOC-UAW turned the picket line into a red carpet for Democratic Party politicians and the pseudo-left, above all the DSA and its youth branch, the Young Democratic Socialists of America (YDSA). Bernie Sanders intervened in support of GSOC-UAW in the first week of the strike. While promoting the Democratic Party, GSOC-UAW leaders blacked out any serious political discussion and worked to create the atmosphere of what they called a “dance party.”

Meanwhile, the UAW helped NYU exert economic pressure on the strikers. As it has done at Columbia and in countless struggles of auto workers, the UAW, which sits on a \$790 million strike fund, gave NYU graduate students a miserable \$275 strike pay per week, an insultingly low sum especially in one of the richest cities in the world. The strike was then shut down days before the grading deadline, meaning that its ultimate impact on NYU was minimal. Day in and day out, graduate students were bombarded with statements and messages from the GSOC-UAW and DSA members on social media, arguing that the contract the union had negotiated constituted a “historic win.”

The result was a climate of confusion, demoralization

and disaffection, which was reflected in both the vote in favor of the contract and the low turnout. Town hall events held by the GSOC Bargaining Committee (BC) before the vote were virtually unattended by the rank-and-file.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) and its club at NYU have intervened in the struggle of graduate students at both NYU and Columbia in direct opposition to the politics of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). From the beginning, we explained that graduate students cannot wage their struggle within the confines of the Democratic Party, the trade unions and any individual campus.

What is required is a turn to the broadest layers of the working class in the US and internationally, which are now being driven into struggle not just against social austerity but the capitalist system as a whole. In order to create new organizations for mass struggle, independent from the unions and nationalist, capitalist politics, the IYSSE supports the call of the International Committee of the Fourth International for an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

The class gulf that separates the IYSSE from the DSA recently found sharp expression in the glorification of the brutal assassination of Leon Trotsky, the co-leader of the October Revolution and leader of the socialist opposition to Stalinism, by leading members of the DSA and YDSA. Among them was also the co-chair of the YDSA at NYU, Jake Colosa, who led the YDSA’s intervention in support of the GSOC-UAW and is a member of the DSA’s steering committee in New York City.

The class lines have been drawn. We urge graduate students and undergraduates who want to discuss our perspective and the lessons of the strike with us to contact the IYSSE today.



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