

Columbia University graduate workers vote to authorize strike action second year in a row

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5 October 2021

Student workers at Columbia University in New York City voted to authorize strike action against the university by 85.5 percent last week, continuing a years-long struggle for their first labor contract. The more than 3,000 graduate and undergraduate students who make up the Student Workers of Columbia-United Auto Workers (SWC-UAW)—renamed from the Graduate Workers of Columbia this summer—are fighting for improved working and living conditions, including decent pay, health care, child care, protections against discrimination and harassment, as well as full recognition of the unit.

The SWC vote coincided with a strike authorization vote by 4,000 Harvard University graduate workers, who also voted in favor of strike action by 91.7 percent, as they fight to negotiate their second contract.

The recent vote at Columbia, which gives the bargaining committee the power to call a strike, follows the significant rank-and-file rejection of last semester's sellout Tentative Agreement (TA), negotiated with help from a "neutral" federal mediator who was a former union bureaucrat. This powerful action was in defiance of both the intransigent Columbia administration and the corrupt UAW, which sought to isolate and shut down the strike at every step while conceding on every main demand of the unit. In a show of widespread opposition after voting the agreement down, the bargaining unit repudiated its bargaining committee and a new bargaining committee was elected for the current semester.

As demonstrated by the SWC's strike authorization vote, the new academic year has already heated up and reignited struggles.

Following an earlier announcement that student workers would not be given their annual raise this fall, Columbia announced with very little notice before this semester began that it was changing how graduate workers received their stipend. In the past, graduate workers would receive a large lump sum at the beginning of the academic year, which helped secure housing and other living expenses, while receiving a semimonthly payroll throughout the semester to cover the remaining stipend.

The new policy reduces this semester's initial lump stipend sum by nearly 75 percent—from \$10,600 to \$2,600—while doing away with lump sums entirely going forward. Graduate workers

will now only be paid on a semimonthly payroll schedule. This has also been widely understood as a retaliatory action set to punish workers if another strike takes place.

The stipend reduction left many student workers incensed. A petition demanding that Columbia reverse this policy and pay student workers their full stipends on time was circulated and signed by over 1,100 student workers.

In response, Columbia's Vice President of Human Relations Dan Driscoll made clear that the new policy was not up for discussion, yet proposed an August 12 meeting with the Bargaining Committee (BC) to go over questions about the change. Driscoll also vehemently rejected the BC's demand, which is part of the SWC's new bylaws, that this meeting, as well as all meetings with the university, be open to the entire unit.

In an email, Driscoll wrote, "Whatever the purpose or nature of the meeting, we view a discussion or bargaining session at which an unlimited number of people can attend as unproductive," allowing for "no more than five" members outside the BC to attend. After both sides failed to reach agreement on the meeting conditions, it was canceled.

A similar course took place at the first scheduled bargaining session of the semester on August 25, where the SWC was planning on denouncing the stipend policy change, as well as the university's inadequate and unsafe reopening plan. However, Columbia rejected the SWC's open bargaining policy, blocking entrance to the meeting by the rank-and-file, which effectively shut down the meeting and future sessions.

However, after a strike authorization vote was called shortly after, Columbia agreed to the SWC's open bargaining policy on September 15 and bargaining sessions have resumed. At the most recent October 1 session, the SWC presented COVID-19 concerns surrounding a lack of contact tracing and test result transparency on campus, giving Columbia a new proposal package of their demands. The university is set to respond at the next bargaining session on October 7, which will inform whether or not the SWC will call a strike.

The BC's current proposal consists of a minimum salary of \$45,000 for 12-month Ph.D. appointments, annual salary increases of 3 percent, and a minimum rate of \$26 for hourly workers. By comparison, the GWC's initial demands were for

\$47,800 (a 15 percent increase above the current \$41,520) for 12-month Ph.D. appointments, salary increases of 5 percent/4 percent/4 percent over the course of the three-year contract, and a minimum hourly rate of \$35, while the previous UAW- and Columbia-endorsed Tentative Agreement (TA) gave \$42,350 for 12-month Ph.D. appointments, annual salary increases of 3 percent, and a minimum hourly rate of \$17.

The BC's current proposal for health care—which is separate from the health care benefit program available to all students—is a \$300,000 fund for out-of-pocket expenses, whereas last semester's rejected TA had a health care fund of \$250,000 by year three of the contract. Yet, out-of-pocket costs for 3,000 student workers can easily reach several million dollars.

For non-discrimination and harassment, the BC is currently demanding access to neutral third-party arbitration without any internal Columbia process required, whereas the previous TA did not allow this and only allowed grievances to go through an internal arbitration process with arbitrators picked by the university.

On unit recognition, the BC's proposal demands that all student workers who provide instructional services, regardless of appointment status and weekly hours worked, be recognized as part of the union bargaining unit. Last semester's TA left student workers out of the unit who had certain job titles and who worked less than an average of 15 hours per week.

A word must be said about the SWC's newly established BC, which put forth these proposals. In the previous BC, three out of 10 members were part of the reformist Academic Workers for a Democratic Union (AWDU), which at times postured as opponents of the UAW bureaucracy, yet fulfilled the role of blocking any break from it. Once the BC was repudiated, a new reformist outfit called Workers Empowerment (WE) was established, claiming to be "committed to bottom-up collective action to win a strong contract with Columbia." All 10 WE candidates, which included two AWDU and prior BC members, were elected to the BC in July.

A major experience of the SWC rank-and-file last semester was the betrayals of their own BC. After a unit poll showed that a top demand student workers "need in their contract" was a 5 percent/4 percent/4 percent compensation rate increase, the BC ignored this entirely and proposed to Columbia a 3 percent/4 percent/5 percent deal, which was shouted down by membership when initially proposed.

The 3/4/5 proposal was eventually whittled down to just 3 percent increases for each year of the contract, a de-facto pay cut when union dues and soaring inflation rates are taken into account. The newly constituted WE-led BC has accepted the concessions of the previous BC, putting forth the same miserly 3 percent raises and only increasing 12-month appointment compensation by a mere 6 percent from the sellout TA voted down by the majority of SWC members in April.

This tactic of dressing up concessions was also seen last

semester at New York University, where the BC for the Graduate Student Organizing Committee-United Auto Workers (GSOC-UAW) negotiated a six-year no-strike contract that was presented as a "historic victory," following a three-week strike.

Columbia student workers, who have been waging a courageous fight since 2014 against the stonewalling of one of the wealthiest universities in the world, must draw the necessary conclusions from their experiences, particularly over the past year. They must advance demands based not on what the university claims it can afford, but what workers need. No progressive struggle can be waged within the framework of the UAW and the AFL-CIO trade union apparatus, which has done everything it can to artificially suppress the class struggle.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote in a statement in May of this year:

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.

Only through the development of their own rank-and-file committee, independent of the UAW and fighting to unify with workers across industries and national boundaries, will Columbia student workers be able to secure these rights. We urge all those who wish to take up this fight to contact us today.



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