

Columbia University student workers strike for the second time this year

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Over 3,000 graduate and undergraduate student workers at Columbia University went out on strike Wednesday, resuming their battle for livable wages, expanded medical coverage and improved workplace conditions after a strike was shut down by the union this spring.

The first two days on the picket line saw an outpouring of support, with striking student workers joined by hundreds of undergraduates and other supporters. The demands for wages that provide student workers a modicum of financial stability, child care subsidies, insurance coverage of basic dental and vision procedures and workplaces free of harassment resonates powerfully in a city home to the immense resources of Wall Street alongside extraordinary social inequality.

The Columbia strike takes place amid a growing wave of strikes internationally. This past month has seen an eruption of struggles, including metal workers in South Africa, health care workers in Germany, municipal workers in Scotland and in New Brunswick, Canada. In the United States, fellow education workers have struck in Scranton, Pennsylvania and at Harvard, where student workers walked out for three days last week.

The largest strike in the US is currently at John Deere, where 10,000 workers across the Midwest and South have picketed for three weeks and counting. Workers there rejected a second tentative agreement, rebuffing attempts by the United Auto Workers (UAW) to shut down the strike and force them to accept another sellout contract. The UAW is attempting to replay the scene from the Volvo Trucks earlier this year, where it ignored a “no” vote on a concessionary agreement and browbeat workers into passing the exact same contract to end their strike.

The current walkout is the second at the university this year. The three-week-long strike that began in March was sabotaged by the UAW and the bargaining committee for the Graduate Workers of Columbia, part of UAW Local 2110, which called off the strike despite 94 percent of grad students voting to continue it. They subsequently negotiated a miserable agreement that was rejected by a majority of members .

After the debacle, the union rebranded as the Student Workers of Columbia (SWC) and elected a new bargaining committee after the former one was repudiated. In practice, this entailed the replacement of one bogus “reform” caucus in the union’s leadership with another. As the *World Socialist Web Site* recently wrote:

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 payout 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.

In the lead-up to the present strike, the university has gone on the offensive, making clear it is indifferent to graduate workers who cannot afford rent, pay medical bills and care for their children. The university refused to give workers a raise at the start of the semester and has changed the way it distributes stipends to withhold these funds from workers during the strike. Now stipends are distributed semimonthly, whereas previously, they were provided in a lump sum at the start of the semester. Columbia University, a real estate behemoth with a \$15 billion endowment, hopes to ratchet up the financial pressure on strikers, inducing them to cross the picket line and give up the strike.

The UAW is lending the university administration a helping hand. As with the John Deere strike, the International limits strike pay to a poverty level of \$275 a week. Striking Columbia workers will not receive their first payment from this fund until November 18.

Also in the period before the strike, the SWC advanced one-sided concessions, amounting to tens of millions less demanded of the university. To cover up its role, the bargaining committee has hailed the university's shift towards consideration of neutral arbitration for harassment complaints as a "breakthrough."

Throughout negotiations this week, the university fixated on a central procedural demand for mediation. Mediation played a critical role in shutting down the strike this Spring as the union used it to justify a strike

"pause." Under the guidance of a former union bureaucrat as mediator, the deal that emerged met none of the main demands of the striking workers.

Revealingly, the bargaining committee did not reject this maneuver outright. Instead, it stated that now was too soon and that a precondition for mediation must be an updated written proposal by Columbia or significant movement on some element of the agreement. The SWC is opening the door for a repeat of the Spring strike under the guise that the problem with mediation last time was that it was poorly executed.

In fact, it was a conscious move by the UAW to undermine workers' fight for basic necessities and arrive at an accommodation with the university. It was coupled with the enforced isolation of the strike, even as fellow graduate workers at New York University, who are part of the same local, were eager to begin their strike.

Columbia student workers must not allow the union to sabotage their struggle again. Workers at John Deere have provided a powerful lead, building on the experience at Volvo Trucks and auto parts manufacturer Dana Inc. They have formed rank-and-file committees independent of the union to fight against the UAW's betrayals and to appeal to other sections of workers for a common struggle. The success of the struggle at Columbia depends on developing a worker-controlled rank-and-file committee, independent of the UAW, striving to unify with workers across the city and beyond.



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