"The issues are increasingly becoming the same at schools everywhere, it's the administration versus workers"

Columbia University student workers speak out at second strike of 2021

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Over 3,000 graduate student workers, members of the Student Workers of Columbia (SWC), at Columbia University in New York City, are striking for the second time this year for improved wages and basic social rights in the most expensive city in the US. The SWC is a part of United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 2110. The strike is part of a years-long struggle by Columbia student workers for a decent contract.

In the spring, the SWC, which was at the time known as the Graduate Workers of Columbia (GWC), led a strike, which was paused for mediation by a supposedly neutral third party. Rank-and-file student workers opposed the halting and the subsequent calling off of the strike by the UAW. Several months later, a new bargaining committee, which presents itself as a reformed version of its discredited predecessor, is carrying out essentially the same policies by isolating the strike and limiting its demands to what Columbia says it can afford.

On Monday, about 65 students marched in the central campus plaza near the Low Library. The event garnered broad sympathy by Columbia students, faculty and staff alike, and the strike has drawn widespread support of students across the country.

Student workers spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* on the conditions they faced. Jessica, an international student, denounced the recent move by the administration to divide stipend payments to graduate workers, formerly awarded as an annual lump sum, into biweekly disbursements. The administration's tactic, she said, was clearly aimed at gaining financial leverage over striking students.

"I'm picketing today because I'm scared for myself and for my colleagues. Since the switch to regular payments instead of a one-time disbursement, I've had several delays in my checks. This has happened multiple times. It's like they don't even regard it as a major issue."

Several students reported that last Friday the administration issued a provocative letter to graduate workers informing them that they need to confirm they had not been on strike to receive their pay. "This is a shameful strikebreaking move," Jessica commented. "I have until today to confirm that I wasn't on strike to get paid. I'm really crossing my fingers that the union is prepared to fight this."

She continued to detail the plight of international students at Columbia University, which is representative of conditions facing international students at universities around the country and the world.

"For me, since I come from a country where political relations with the US haven't been as strained, I'm not as worried about my visa status. Of course, it's always a concern in the back of every international student's mind. But for my colleagues who are from countries such as Russia or China—and there are many such students at Columbia—I know that they're terrified to speak up. What will happen to their visas if they can't afford to pay rent and they don't have a proper address here? What could happen to them if they were targeted by the administration just for asking for the minimum which was promised to them?

"We're particularly vulnerable to the changes in payment disbursements because we are only allowed to work 20 hours per week, and we are not allowed to work outside of the university. There's absolutely no way we can make up the financial deficit if the administration delays our payments in any way."

Printed testimonials from strikers were posted around

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central campus. One said, “I am an international student and a portion of my income every month goes to support my family back home. Last month, I got to know that my dad was getting laid off from his job. This means that the monetary support I usually send would need to increase. With the rent that I pay living in NYC and Columbia docking our pay, I don’t know how I will manage. The stress is eating me alive!!!”

Another read, “As an immigrant with no family support network to rely on, I am entirely at the mercy of the administration for my very existence… [Because of] my research work … I am de facto required to live close to campus, where housing is expensive and my salary is barely able to cover rent, healthcare and living expenses… Now that Columbia is docking my pay … I am in serious danger of being unable to register for courses … which in turn could put me at grave risk of losing my immigration status and being deported.”

Reports abound of members of this highly exploited layer of students losing visa status because of the economic fallout from COVID-19. In 2020, the Trump administration issued threats to international students to whip up xenophobic and racist sentiment and to force the lifting of restrictions to in-person activity.

Elizabeth, a picketing Columbia masters student, spoke about her support for the strike. “Health care is a major concern for student workers right now. But the issues are increasingly becoming the same at schools everywhere, it’s the administration versus workers.

“It’s insane that $45,000 per year is what’s being offered for some workers. That’s less than the average rent in this neighborhood, never mind your other expenses. You’ll be lucky if you can get by with six other roommates with that amount, let alone if you want to provide for a family.”

Another posted testimonial gave a harrowing account from a Ph.D. candidate who skipped dental treatment because they could not afford needed dental care, which is not included in Columbia’s benefit package. “I was presented with pricing options [which were] in a different universe from my financial resources and I [now] have to struggle with poor teeth health throughout the year with no end in sight. I wake up every morning with a splitting headache and fatigue from poor sleep… this can’t keep going on…”

Noel, a Columbia graduate fellowship student who was attending the rally, told the WSWS, “I have a tremendous amount of sympathy and support for my striking colleagues. I see what they’re fighting against as the same as my struggles that I go through every day. But since my program isn’t covered by the union, I’ve been told I am not protected if I walk out. It reeks of a divide-and-conquer tactic. Students need to realize that this movement is about all of us.”

An undergraduate student told the WSWS, “There’s a series of strikes going on in the country right now. I really hope that this movement becomes part of that.”

Many workers across the US and internationally feel the same. A conscious move by striking student workers at Columbia to join with 10,000 striking workers who rejected a second UAW-brokered sellout contract last week at John Deere, the agricultural machinery giant, would provide a powerful impetus to the strike wave now emerging across the world, including Kellogg’s workers; nurses and other health care workers in California, West Virginia and Massachusetts; Alabama coal miners, Scranton, Pennsylvania, teachers and others.

The expansion of the Columbia strike would be a blow to the university administration, which consists of the most ardent defenders of the interests of Wall Street and of the American military-intelligence apparatus.

But for that new organizations with a new perspective are necessary. No change of personnel at any level can overcome the pro-capitalist character of the misnamed “unions.” Rather, students seeking to combat the attacks by university administrations must align their struggles with the growing movement in the working class to break with these corrupt organizations and form their own independent rank-and-file committee to take over conduct of the strike.

We urge all students who wish to advance this fight to become involved with the IYSSE, and contact the WSWS .

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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