

Columbia student worker union concedes to second round of contract mediation in third week of strike

Elliott Murtagh, Daniel de Vries
19 November 2021

Earlier this week, the Student Workers of Columbia-United Auto Workers union (SWC-UAW) agreed to move their ongoing bargaining negotiations with Columbia University over their first labor contract into mediation. While the details remain to be worked out, the move by the SWC-UAW is a major step aimed at selling out the three-week-long strike of more than 3,000 graduate student-workers for adequate living and working conditions.

Last semester, over immense opposition by the rank-and-file, the union called off the strike in exchange for federal mediation. The result of the mediation was a miserable tentative agreement that was powerfully rejected by the unit.

By agreeing again to mediation, a key procedural demand of the university, the UAW is laying the groundwork for another betrayal. Third-party mediation is a tried and tested tactic by unions and employers to ram through concessionary agreements. It provides the union with cover for agreeing to demands that under other circumstances would be rejected out of hand by the rank-and-file.

Pledges by the bargaining committee that mediation will be different this time around should be treated with contempt. The fundamental problem with mediation this Spring was not, as the bargaining committee claims, an unfavorable mediator or a wrong tactical decision to end the strike before mediation began. Instead, these “mistakes” were intentional. Columbia University demanded the strike end before finals began, and the union found a means to do so.

The SWC-UAW is again seeking a way to end the strike on Columbia’s terms. The move towards mediation plays into the hands of the wealthy and

corporatized university administration, which has been stonewalling negotiations and refusing to move until a mediator is secured. It undermines the power of the strike at a critical point.

The Columbia walkout is part of a powerful wave of strikes and other job actions initiated over the past couple of months. This international phenomenon reflects a growing militancy in the working class under conditions of soaring social inequality and in the wake of a continuing pandemic that has killed millions.

The unions, however, have countered this militancy with desperate maneuvers aimed at sabotaging the strike movement. Just this past week, the International Alliance of Stage Employees, Moving Picture Technicians, Artists and Allied Crafts (IATSE) announced the passage of agreements for 60,000 film production workers despite a majority voting against it, and the Alliance of Health Care Unions called off a planned strike of 32,000 health care workers at Kaiser Permanente on the basis of an agreement that provides raises well below inflation and maintains unsafe staffing levels.

Most notably, the UAW announced Tuesday the end of the month-long strike by 10,000 workers at Deere. UAW officials intimidated and threatened striking workers, pushing through the passage of a contract proposal effectively the same as one that had already been voted down a week previous.

In the aftermath of the sellout, the UAW is presenting the deal at Deere as a huge win. This lie was promoted directly to striking Columbia student workers Wednesday during a closed-door meeting with a Deere worker aligned with a reformist faction of the UAW. According to our sources, the discussion covered up the

treacherous role of the union and ignored the brewing rebellion against the UAW embodied by the establishment of the Deere Strike Rank-and-File Committee, while presenting a deal that facilitates a brutal production line speed-up as a major victory.

The same type of betrayal is being prepared at Columbia, where the union and the university are presently discussing the details of mediation.

The SWC-UAW has requested mediator Kevin Flanigan to take over negotiations, citing “extensive experience in higher-ed mediation.” Flanigan is the director of the Office of Conciliation for New York State’s Public Employment Relations Board. He also sits on the Board of Advisors of the Scheinman Institute, part of Cornell University’s School of Industrial and Labor Relations (ILR).

The ILR was established in 1945 to provide “a common training program” for representatives of labor and management and, over the decades, has produced a “who’s who” of bureaucrats and executives for the AFL-CIO, corporate America and the US Labor Department—in addition to collaborating with and being funded by the CIA during the Cold War.

A member of both last semester’s and the current SWC-UAW bargaining committee openly admitted to *Columbia Spectator* that “mediation was garbage last time,” yet “we are going to start anew.” The *Spectator* went on to say that the union “initially expressed its goal to make more progress in bargaining before moving into mediation.”

Instead of making progress and forcing Columbia to concede, however, the bargaining committee have been the ones conceding at the table.

A recent *Spectator* article reported that “the union recently moved to cut a provision of its plan that would have provided healthcare benefits to casual workers working under 10 hours a week, as well as to dependents of undergraduates and masters students...By the university’s estimates, the SWC’s move to cut down on beneficiaries for healthcare has lowered the cost of the agreement by \$60 million.”

On compensation, the bargaining committee recently made a presentation based on the cost of attendance and living expense estimates on Columbia’s website, concluding that “workers would need to earn \$48,595 [before tax] for the year 2021-2022, well above the union’s proposals [\$45,000 annually with 3% annual

raises],” while pointing out the “national 31-year high in year-over-year inflation (6.22%).” While making this case for what should undoubtedly be much higher salaries for graduate workers living in New York City, the union also exposes their current demands as wholly inadequate with below-inflation raises, which would result in pay cuts.

Meanwhile, Columbia, along with the UAW, continues to put the financial squeeze on student-workers. After changing the way it distributes stipends at the beginning of the semester, the university has begun withholding striking graduate workers’ stipends, which students rely on to live.

In response to this attack, and because the UAW starves its striking members with a measly \$275 weekly strike pay, the SWC has announced organizing a rent strike for graduate workers in Columbia housing until the university gives students back pay for lost wages while on strike. While a rent strike can be an important tool, absent the mobilization of broader sections of workers strikers are being asked to put their housing at risk come the end of the eviction moratorium in January.

In another act of aggression, the university called in the NYPD to set up barricades and intimidate striking workers during picketing last Thursday, an extremely provocative move given the call by students for a campus free of police repression.

Behind these moves is an understanding that Columbia student workers are in a very strong position precisely because of the broader struggle of the working class that is emerging. To advance the fight at Columbia, the initiative must be taken out of the hands of the UAW-aligned union and brought into the hands of the rank-and-file. Students must orient outwards to the millions of workers in New York City and beyond in a common offensive. We urge student workers to link up with the New York Educators Rank-and-File Committee, which is meeting this Sunday at 2pm eastern, to carry out this fight.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact