

Columbia student workers: Expand the strike and oppose UAW sabotage!

International Youth and Students for Social Equality at NYU
6 December 2021

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at New York University (NYU) supports the over 3,000 graduate and undergraduate student workers at Columbia University striking for living wages, child care subsidies, expanded medical coverage, effective protections against harassment, and improved workplace conditions.

Striking Columbia student workers have garnered immense support from students and workers at the university and across New York City. Taking place in the home city of Wall Street, which is plagued by extraordinary levels of social inequality, and amidst a raging global pandemic, the strike is part of the growing resistance of workers and young people to the abysmal conditions they face in New York and beyond.

But the strike has reached a decisive crossroads. If left in the hands of the United Auto Workers (UAW), it will suffer the same fate as grad student workers' struggles at Harvard and New York University. Rather than becoming a catalyst for a movement of broader sections of the working class against the relentless sacrifice of lives for corporate profit, striking workers will be isolated and worn down by the UAW before it imposes a deal dictated by Columbia's financial backers.

There is another outcome that can and must be fought for. The IYSSE urges Columbia students to form a rank-and-file strike committee to formulate the demands that grad student workers need and outline a strategy to fight for them. This committee, made up of the most trusted and militant workers, must act on behalf of striking grad students, not the UAW bureaucracy, the Democratic Party and the Columbia board of trustees. Above all, this committee will reach out to transit and other city workers, teachers and health care workers, industrial, logistics and service workers, and fight to mobilize the power of the working class against the ruling class and both of its political parties.

For almost two years, workers and youth internationally have experienced suffering and death on a scale equivalent to the First World War. As a result of the homicidal policies pursued by capitalist governments around the world, an

estimated 15 million people have died and hundreds of millions more have contracted COVID-19. In every country, the ruling class and its political parties have prioritized profits over the lives of workers and their families. The policy of "letting the virus rip," has resulted in the emergence of more infectious and deadly strains, including Delta and Omicron.

In the US, both the Republican and Democratic parties are responsible for the infection of tens of millions and an estimated 1 million deaths. The catchphrase of both the presidential administrations of would-be-Fuhrer Donald Trump and Democrat Joe Biden has been, "the cure can't be worse than the disease." Both administrations have downplayed the threat of the virus and forced workers back into unsafe workplaces and herded children back into contaminated schools to ensure the full resumption of the production of profits.

The reopening of universities across the US and internationally for in-person instruction reflects this broader murderous policy of the ruling class. Columbia University, with an endowment of over \$11 billion, has fully reopened for in-person learning, which has resulted in hundreds of infections among students, faculty, and staff. The university administration, a collection of multi-millionaires and billionaires strongly tied to Wall Street and the government, cares only for the millions it will take in from the full reopening of campus.

It is critical that Columbia grad students shed any naïve and romantic notions about the "unions." The United Auto Workers, the United Federation of Teachers, the Transport Workers Union and others have nothing in common with the organizations built by militant workers and largely led by socialists in the early decades of the 20th century.

After decades of the union collaborating in the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs and the transformation of cities like Detroit into industrial wastelands, rank-and-file UAW members have nothing but contempt for an organization that endlessly boasts about its collusion with the bosses, promotes anti-Mexican and anti-Asian

nationalism and has betrayed one struggle after the other, most recently at Volvo Trucks, Dana and John Deere. On top of this, a dozen UAW officials, including former UAW presidents Gary Jones and Dennis Williams, have been convicted for embezzlement and taking bribes for signing pro-company contracts.

The UAW has not only overseen the loss of jobs, wages and benefits, it has also kept workers on the job throughout the pandemic even as COVID has spread through the factories killing dozens of autoworkers. Factories only closed for several weeks in March 2020 after rank-and-file auto workers launched wildcat strikes, storming UAW local offices to denounce union officials.

Having overseen the loss of two-thirds of its members—including 90 percent of UAW members at GM, Ford and Chrysler—since 1979, the UAW turned its attention to university workers to increase its dues base. But university workers have not fared any better than industrial workers.

The Harvard Graduate Students Union-UAW called off a strike at the last minute and pushed through a rotten contract. Last semester's strike at Columbia was shut down by the Graduate Workers of Columbia-UAW behind the backs of students, leading to a pro-university and union-backed sellout tentative agreement that was rejected by student workers with immense hostility toward the union leadership.

At NYU, the Graduate Student Organizing Committee (GSOC), affiliated with the same UAW Local 2110 as the Columbia student union, only authorized a strike once the strike at Columbia was shut down. The contract that resulted from negotiations between GSOC and NYU during the strike—fraudulently promoted as a “historic win”—failed to meet any of the original demands.

The hourly wage increase in the NYU contract falls far short of providing a living wage to graduate students residing in one of the most expensive cities in the world and only applies to a portion of graduate workers. NYU offset any dent to its profits by cutting job positions for graduate students, which was made possible by GSOC dropping the demand forbidding unit erosion (the removal of graduate student positions) midway through the strike. The contract also provides little to no funding for health care and international and immigrant students.

Presently, the student union at Columbia, renamed Student Workers of Columbia (SWC), is, like GSOC at NYU, presenting itself as more democratic. After giving in to Columbia's demand for another round of mediation, the new bargaining committee is collaborating with a state mediator, with decades of experience in imposing the dictates of corporate management, to negotiate a contract with

Columbia using the NYU contract as a framework.

Last week, in an open attack, graduate workers received an email from Columbia threatening to fire workers for the spring semester if they remain on strike past December 10, just before final exams begin.

This must be answered by an appeal to all workers to oppose this attack, which is being coordinated with Mayor Bill de Blasio and the Democratic Party, which controls every lever of political power in the city.

The Democratic Party is a party of Wall Street, the military and the race- and gender-obsessed politics of the affluent upper-middle class. A successful struggle for workers' basic social rights requires the political mobilization of the working class independent of this hostile party and all its pseudo-left appendages, including the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA).

The Socialist Equality Party and the IYSSE have fought for the establishment of independent rank-and-file committees of workers, including the New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. The growing national and international network of rank-and-file committees are fighting for the halting of in-person learning in schools, the closure of non-essential workplaces and the elimination of the virus to save lives.

Graduate student workers are fighting not simply against the university administration, but against broader social forces, and ultimately, capitalism. A successful struggle requires that this strike be expanded into the broad sections of the working class fighting for its social rights. This tremendous and objectively revolutionary social force must be politically mobilized against the entire capitalist system and for socialism.

The overthrow of the decrepit carcass of capitalism by the working class is the only progressive solution to the devastation of the pandemic, social inequality, exploitation, oppression, the serious threat of fascist dictatorship and war and all the ills that plague humanity. The Columbia University strike can be the starting point for a powerful revolutionary movement of the working class. However, for this to happen, a new revolutionary socialist leadership in the working class must be built.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact