

United Auto Workers prepares another sellout contract at Columbia University

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With the ongoing strike by 3,000 graduate and undergraduate student workers at Columbia University in New York City in its ninth week, the leadership of the Student Workers of Columbia-United Auto Workers union (SWC-UAW) has signaled that a tentative agreement with the university is close at hand.

Based on what the SWC and Columbia have already agreed upon, it is clear that the resulting contract would be wholly inadequate in meeting the needs of striking student workers facing surging inflation.

Last week, in the face of the university's continued stonewalling and illegal threat to not reappoint striking graduate workers next semester, the SWC presented a package to Columbia "designed to end the strike while still securing a fair contract for our workers." In a public document the SWC circulated to explain the contents of the package, they boasted:

The package we presented today also represents dramatic compromises on issues that the University identified as concerns. Today's package costs \$15.7 million less (21.5%) than our December 7 proposal and \$30.4 million less (34.7%) than our November 2 proposal. It has a total cost of approximately \$57.2 million over the status quo over 3 years—about \$19 million per year. That's just 0.6% of the \$3.33 billion Columbia's assets appreciated in the past year alone.

This wildly open admission of how quickly and substantially the SWC's bargaining committee (BC) has conceded on workers' demands and the minuscule financial impact their package has in comparison to Columbia's enormous wealth speaks volumes about the character of the TA.

Notably, these recent money-saving concessions have been negotiated under a state mediator the SWC BC agreed to

bring in. It has been fully evident from the start that the ostensibly nonpartisan state mediator has been negotiating on behalf of the university.

The most recent concessions include lowering salaries for 9-month Ph.D. appointments by \$2,000 to \$40,250 (which includes a \$6,500 summer stipend), reducing hourly worker rates by \$2 so that casual student workers would make \$24/hour by 2023, and no longer requesting retroactive raises. By comparison, the union's initial demands for 9-month Ph.D. appointments with summer stipends was \$43,500 and a minimum hourly rate of \$35.

It should be noted that the SWC BC had also accepted 3 percent annual salary increases earlier this semester, which was part of the rejected TA last semester, and amounts to a paycut when factoring in soaring inflation costs and union dues. The union's original demand for salary increases were for 5 percent/4 percent/4 percent over the course of a three-year contract.

For health care, the SWC BC dropped its demand for vision coverage and lowered the dental premium coverage from 100 percent to 75 percent. For non-discrimination and harassment, the union has accepted Columbia's internal Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action (EOAA) process, only allowing an arbitrator to come in 75 days after the EOAA process begins, which mirrors the Columbia Postdoctoral Workers-UAW union's contract.

In response to these concessions, Columbia returned with a "best and final offer" last Thursday.

According to the SWC leadership, the main outstanding articles where there is disagreement with the university are unit recognition and contract duration. Columbia now wants a five-year contract, where hourly workers would have to work at least 15 hours/week or log 250 hours in order to fall under the contract, which would significantly limit student workers' coverage.

In contrast, SWC wants a shorter three-year contract, which would cover all student workers who provide instructional or research services, regardless of hours worked. The demand for a shorter contract is a blatant

admission that the current contract being negotiated by the SWC BC does not provide adequate working and living conditions, including a living wage, and is openly being conveyed as such to the unit.

Last week, the SWC held an online rally with a who's who of union officials, elected Democrats and prominent pseudo-left figures. These included UAW Region 9A Director Bev Brakeman, who negotiated a secret deal in 2018 with Columbia University to block strike action by graduate students until April 2020; Democratic New York State Senator Robert Jackson, Democratic New York State Assembly member Phara Souffrant Forrest, co-chair of NYC-DSA Jeremy Cohan, NewsGuild CWA Local 31003 President Susan DeCarava, and *Labor Notes* board Chair Ellen David Friedman. These speakers spent their time propping up the unions and promoting trade unionism, telling Columbia student workers that unions work and victory is close at hand.

The fact of the matter is that the ongoing struggle at Columbia has thus far, under the criminal leadership of the UAW with the support of the Democratic Party and the pseudo-left, been implementing a strategy of defeat for workers. The SWC BC has arguably pursued every state- and AFL-CIO-sanctioned avenue. What has been the outcome? Student workers will once again be presented a contract that will keep student workers struggling to stay afloat in one of the richest cities in the world, employed by one of the wealthiest universities in the world!

The same strategy was implemented earlier this year at New York University to sellout the struggle by over 2,000 graduate student workers and fraudulently present it as a historic victory.

Student workers must see this as part of a well-worn and conscious policy of the ruling class which encompasses a decades-long attack on the working class resulting in stagnating wages and declining living conditions in the US.

This is most sharply expressed in what has taken place during the past two years of the pandemic. Amid an incredible public health crisis, in which over 820,000 Americans have succumbed to COVID-19, the capitalist class has seen its wealth skyrocket. In fact, the wealth of the world's billionaires rose a staggering 60 percent in 2020, while the median worker's pay rose just 1.9 percent, largely due to the temporary increase in unemployment benefits.

In November, the Department of Labor reported that inflation rose to a 21-year high of 6.2 percent.

Hundreds of thousands of university jobs have been cut across the US since the start of the pandemic, while educators and students have been forced back into unsafe classrooms leading to a further spread of COVID-19. Meanwhile, Columbia, which is heavily tied to Wall Street

and whose in-person reopening this year triggered COVID-19 outbreaks, has reported that its total assets rose from \$21.33 billion in 2020 to \$24.69 billion in 2021, with \$16.65 billion, or 63 percent, of these assets representing investments.

But the events of the past two years, which are part of a deepening crisis of capitalism, have triggered something else as well. The graduate students' struggle at Columbia for adequate living and working conditions is part of the largest strike wave in decades extending across the US and internationally.

A critical component of these struggles is a growing rank-and-file rebellion against the degenerated and discredited trade unions, who are doing everything they can to suppress the class struggle, with the UAW leading the pack. This year saw 3,000 Volvo Truck workers vote down three UAW-backed contracts, 10,000 John Deere workers vote down two UAW-backed contracts, and 3,500 Dana auto parts workers vote down one UAW-backed contract before the union bureaucracy, utilizing a combination of lies, manipulation and economic blackmail, bullied the workers into accepting pro-company agreements.

The ruling class as a whole is terrified that every struggle of workers has the potential to garner mass support. If student workers at Columbia, along with their brothers and sisters in the broader working class, want to fight back, they must take this struggle into their own hands. A fight must be organized based on what the working class needs, not what the capitalist class says it can afford! Workers must break from the rotten trade unions and form independent rank-and-file committees to coordinate and link up their struggles.

The strike at Columbia is not over! Reach out to the *International Youth and Students for Social Equality* to take up this struggle today.



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