

UAW secures second tentative agreement at Columbia with de facto pay cuts

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Columbia University in New York City and the Student Workers of Columbia–United Auto Workers (SWC-UAW), the union covering more than 3,000 PhD, Masters and undergraduate workers, announced late last Thursday that they had come to a four-year tentative agreement (TA), ending a 10-week strike by student workers. The deal will be voted on later this month.

This recent TA follows an earlier TA that was powerfully rejected by the rank-and-file in April for falling well short of their demands. While this second TA has been hailed by the leadership on both sides, as well as Democratic politicians and pseudo-left forces, as a “historic deal,” an objective examination of the contract shows it is nothing of the sort.

In a section on the SWC-UAW’s website explaining why they were on strike, they write, “Currently, the University pays graduate student workers \$6,000–\$19,000 below a living wage according to the MIT cost-of-living calculator for New York City, depending on the program we’re in. Some of our members have had to sign up for SNAP benefits to make ends meet, particularly if they have caretaking responsibilities or raise children. Other members—your TAs, RAs, and instructors—have had to move to entirely different cities to offset the cost of rent [during the summer].”

Keeping these numbers in mind, the TA that was just arrived at offers 12-month PhD student workers, whose minimum salary is currently \$41,520, an increase of only \$2,480, bringing their minimum annual salary to \$44,000 this year. Likewise, nine-month PhD student workers, whose minimum salary with an added summer stipend is currently a miserly \$35,140, would receive an increase of only \$3,360, bringing their minimum salary with an added summer stipend to \$38,500 this year.

However, even though the contract would be retroactive to August 1, 2021, these first-year compensation rates will actually be lower because Columbia, as part of its brutal strategy to try and starve out the strike, withheld pay to striking student workers during the 10-week strike and aren’t guaranteeing back pay. While a side letter in the TA states that “schools and departments will identify and make available to returning strikers opportunities for make-up work consistent with program needs,” it is currently unclear to student workers—who are in thousands of dollars of debt from being on strike and receiving the UAW’s meager strike pay of just \$275 per week, despite a nearly \$800 million strike fund—what this means, especially after some departments hired scabs to work during the past semester.

An SWC-UAW e-mail sent out this week stated, “We know back pay is a big cause of anxiety for members of our unit, and while we hope departments commit to making up all lost wages, we are preparing for the event that some may not.” Many rank-and-file members of the union are opposed to accepting a TA when there was no guarantee of back pay and no explanation from Columbia of how work would be made up and paid for. One student tweeted, “Technically the strike is over but instead I spend 100% of the time trying to win backpay so I am equally beleaguered.”

On top of this, the TA would provide a mere 3 percent annual raises—the same amount that was in the previous rejected TA and was widely detested by students. For hourly workers, whose current minimum wage matches New York City’s poverty minimum wage of \$15 an hour, their minimum wage would rise to only \$21 an hour with increases of 2.5 percent during each year of the contract.

By comparison, the SWC-UAW’s initial demands were for \$47,800 per year for 12-month PhD appointments, annual salary increases of 5 percent/4 percent/4 percent over the course of the three-year contract, and a minimum hourly rate of \$35.

Factoring in the historic rise in inflation, which has now reached 7 percent, paired with the 2 percent UAW union dues the contract requires, student workers at Columbia would experience a de facto pay cut as a result.

To distract student workers away from this bleak reality and pressure them to ratify the TA, Columbia is dangling a \$500 contract ratification bonus for PhD students and \$250 for Master’s and undergrad workers.

For health care, the TA creates a \$300,000 student employee support fund by Columbia—separate from the health care benefit program available to all students—for out-of-pocket medical expenses, which increases by \$50,000 in the second year and \$25,000 in the last two years of the contract. Yet, total out-of-pocket costs across the more than 3,000 student workers can easily reach into the millions of dollars. Also included in the contract is 75 percent of dental coverage by Columbia, yet the bargaining unit’s demand for vision coverage was dropped.

Significantly, the new TA, just as the old TA, includes a no-strike clause for the four-year duration of the contract, if passed. This infamous union contract clause effectively prohibits workers from taking organized action against their employer.

The TA does include an arbitration option for student workers

who file a grievance, but is only possible after 75 days of Columbia's internal EOAA (Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action) process not resolving the issue, matching the language in the SWC-UAW's post-doctoral sister union's contract.

Also of note are two side letters to the TA. The first states that "Upon the ratification of this Agreement, the Union agrees to withdraw with prejudice any and all Unfair Labor Practice Charges filed against the University with the NLRB." The SWC-UAW filed these charges against Columbia after the university threatened to fire striking student workers in the middle of the strike.

The other side letter cites Columbia's "right to determine or modify the number, qualifications, scheduling, responsibilities and assignment of Student Employees," which gives the university leeway for unit erosion—the removal of graduate student positions—if it wants to save more money.

How is this sellout contract, which was negotiated by a new Bargaining Committee dominated by a reformist outfit called Workers Empowerment, being promoted?

The SWC-UAW leadership deemed the TA a "historic moment for labor in higher ed" and, admitting perhaps more than they intended, an example of how unions "work." Yet, days before the TA was arrived at, the SWC-UAW Bargaining Committee told student workers that the drawbacks of moving to a four-year contract duration (the SWC wanted three years, Columbia wanted five years) included being "locked in with low compensation rates among other weak spots of our contract, for longer" and admitting that the contract they negotiated doesn't provide living wages.

The pseudo-left has also hailed the TA. The Democratic Socialists of America's New York City chapter Twitter account tweeted, "Strikes work! Congratulations SWC-UAW on your victory," while Democratic Congressman and DSA member Jamaal Bowman and New York City Councillor and DSA member Tiffany Cabán tweeted similar statements. An article in the Morenoite *Left Voice*, which is affiliated with the Socialist Workers Party in Argentina, said, "This struggle should be seen as an inspiration to other higher education workers and other unions across sectors." *Labor Notes* writer Jonah Furman said that Columbia student workers "won an agreement that includes some big ticket items" and is "a big breakthrough for higher education workers" on his blog.

This tactic of dressing up concessions was also pursued last semester at New York University, where the BC for the Graduate Student Organizing Committee—United Auto Workers (GSOC-UAW) negotiated a six-year no-strike contract that was also presented as a "historic victory," following a three-week strike.

Meanwhile, Columbia is touting the contract as "one of the highest compensation offers in the country, representing an increase of nearly \$100 million over the next four years." The university's provost Mary Boyce sent an e-mail to the student body saying, "We are proud of this agreement, which would make Columbia a leader in higher education on a long list of issues affecting student employees."

Plainly stated, the TA is a drop in the bucket for Columbia, which is a \$25 billion institution that saw its assets grow by \$3.33 billion in the past year alone. Columbia pays its President Lee

Bollinger—who is the highest paid private college president in the US—a salary of more than \$4 million per year. Two days after the TA was secured, it was announced that Columbia purchased the former Fairway Market site in Harlem for \$84 million in a cash deal! A Twitter user commenting on the purchase perceptively wrote, "You go, Columbia! Putting that 84 large on the table for some prime real estate after spending months crying poor mouth with your grad workers!"

Taken as a whole, the experience of the UAW at Columbia is a case study in the utter bankruptcy of the pro-corporate unions.

As we wrote earlier this year:

Columbia student workers, who have been waging a courageous fight since 2014 against the stonewalling of one of the wealthiest universities in the world, must draw the necessary conclusions from their experiences, particularly over the past year. They must advance demands based not on what the university claims it can afford, but what workers need. No progressive struggle can be waged within the framework of the UAW and the AFL-CIO trade union apparatus, which has done everything it can to artificially suppress the class struggle.

In order for their struggle to move forward, graduate students must not only build new independent organizations of struggle, but these organizations must adopt a new political strategy, one that is based on the international working class and the independence from both capitalist parties.

The fight for living wages, affordable health care and housing, and high-quality education must be developed into a politically conscious effort to mobilize the working class in a counteroffensive against the capitalist system, which sacrifices every aspect of life, including life itself, for private profit.

The social basis for such a fight is the international working class.

Only through the development of their own rank-and-file committee, independent of the UAW and fighting to unify with workers across industries and national boundaries, will Columbia student workers be able to secure these rights. We urge all those who wish to take up this fight to contact us today.



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