

Columbia student workers ratify contract with cuts in real wages: The political lessons

Elliott Murtagh
7 February 2022

On January 28, undergraduate and graduate workers in the Student Workers of Columbia-United Auto Workers (SWC-UAW) voted by a margin of 2,099 to 51 to ratify their first contract with the private New York City Ivy League university.

During the spring semester of last year, Columbia student workers struck for three weeks and then rejected a tentative agreement reached by the SWC-UAW. During the winter semester, student workers again struck, this time for 10 weeks, which ended with the end of the semester in December.

The new four-year contract does not meet the demands that the student workers have fought for. It provides just 3 percent annual raises following the initial 6 percent raise given to the lowest paid PhD students on 12-month appointment. This means a cut in real wages when factoring in union dues and historic inflation rates, currently at 7 percent.

SWC-UAW's website states that Columbia "pays graduate student workers \$6,000–\$19,000 below a living wage." However, the ratified contract only gives graduate workers a raise of \$2,480 for 12-month PhD appointments for a minimum annual salary of \$44,000, and a \$3,360 raise for nine-month PhD appointments for a minimum annual salary with an added summer stipend of \$38,500. SWC-UAW leadership has openly admitted that these meager raises do not yet provide student workers with a living wage in one of the most expensive cities in the world.

The contract creates a \$300,000 student employee health care support fund for out-of-pocket medical expenses, despite the fact that these medical expenses for the roughly 3,000 student workers can easily add up to millions. The contract also provides 75 percent dental coverage, but no vision coverage.

The contract also contains a third-party arbitration option for grievances, but only if Columbia's internal Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action (EOAA) process does not resolve the issue after 75 days.

In addition, there is a no-strike clause for the entire four-year duration of the contract. Just like the New York University (NYU) contract before it, this means that the new contract at Columbia will tie students' hands in the future under conditions in which millions of workers are being radicalized and driven into struggle.

On top of this, back pay for make-up work by student workers who struck and had pay withheld for several months was not guaranteed by the university.

In response to the contract ratification, Columbia celebrated the announcement, with Provost Mary Boyce emailing the entire student body, touting the agreement as "one of the most comprehensive and generous contracts" between a private university and student workers.

Columbia is celebrating for good reason. It has noted that the contract will cost the university less than \$25 million a year. Columbia's total assets currently stand at over \$25 billion and have grown by 15 percent in the last year alone, fueled by the immense surges in the stock market. That is, the new SWC-UAW deal will cost Columbia a mere tenth of one percent of its total assets.

The fact that this throwing of crumbs to workers is being presented as a "historic victory," even while SWC-UAW leaders admit that the contract doesn't yet provide living wages, is absurd.

The Columbia Academic Workers for a Democratic Union (AWDU), a tendency within the SWC-UAW and its leadership, has also hailed the contract and its "many wins" on Twitter, but it was forced to admit the "considerable areas for improvement."

Student workers at Columbia have passed through a critical experience, and lessons must be drawn. The passing of the inadequate SWC-UAW contract by wide margins is the product of the wearing down of student workers over a protracted struggle that was isolated and constrained within the limits of the narrow collective bargaining process.

Student workers have been up against two hostile forces for years. The first is the university administration, run by multi-millionaires and billionaires with deep ties to Wall Street, corporate America, the Democratic Party and the military-industrial complex who have stonewalled three years of negotiations, insisting that student workers' demands are neither affordable nor appropriate.

The second is the United Auto Workers, part of the nationalist and pro-corporate framework of the entire AFL-CIO trade union apparatus, which consistently betrayed student workers on strike and repeated Columbia's lies that their

demands for adequate living and working conditions were not feasible. Both share the aims of containing opposition from a wave of radicalized youth.

As broad rank-and-file opposition mounted to the UAW within the SWC following the powerful rejection of the first tentative agreement, it fell to the AWDU and pseudo-left tendencies like the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) to contain this opposition within the framework of the UAW and Democratic Party politics. A similar process played out at New York University last semester.

The SWC leadership played a critical role in accepting concessions made to the university and selling these concessions to the rank-and-file. Columbia then offered a few dimes here and there to sweeten the unsavory contract, such as a \$500 or \$250 signing bonus depending on one's position.

The struggle at Columbia University took place within the context of growing social opposition in the working class, fueled by a pandemic that has claimed the lives of more than 900,000 people in the United States so far. The ruling class has utilized the pandemic to hand out trillions of dollars to Wall Street, which is being paid through a massive intensification of the exploitation of the working class.

The UAW and the trade union apparatus as a whole has worked to smother opposition and channel it behind the Democratic Party and the Biden administration, which is now spearheading the drive to reopen schools and end all restrictions on the spread of COVID-19.

During the successive strikes at Columbia last year, the UAW-SWC, with the support of the AWDU, sought to prevent the struggle of student workers from uniting even with a similar struggle at New York University, let alone the broader movement of workers throughout the US and internationally.

For more than four decades, the unions have collaborated with governments and corporations to impose the dictates of big business by negotiating concession-filled contracts.

Following the shutdown of the five-week, 3,000-strong Volvo Truck strike last July, culminating in the forcing through of a contract by the UAW that workers had previously rejected, UAW president Ray Curry hailed a "labor-management" partnership. Unions and employers must "partner to drive this nation's economic engine," Curry stated, adding, "Good employers who succeed understand that a happy, productive workforce is essential to corporate success and corporate profits." As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote in response:

Curry is a part of a long line of UAW presidents—starting with Douglas Fraser, who was appointed to the Chrysler board of directors in 1980—whose entire careers in the UAW apparatus have been based on the corporatist doctrine of labor-management "partnership," i.e., that there is an identity of interests between the corporations and workers. This

policy has entailed both the ever-closer integration of the trade unions with management and the capitalist state and the severe deterioration of workers' living standards.

... Despite Curry's claims, "labor-management" partnership and corporatism has not been the guiding principle of the UAW "since its very beginning." The socialist-minded workers and left-wing militants who led mass industrial struggles like the 1936-37 Flint sit-down strike understood that the working class had wholly distinct and antagonistic interests in relation to those of the capitalist owners of the giant industries.

As its dues income has declined due to mass layoffs in the auto industry, the UAW has turned to "organizing" graduate students, where it is playing the same function. The contract was ratified because struggle at Columbia reached a dead end imposed by the UAW and its backers.

Throughout the struggle at Columbia University, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, the student and youth movement of the Socialist Equality Party, exposed the role of the UAW. It fought to connect the movement of students to the broader struggles of the working class against austerity and the horrific pandemic policies of mass infection and death, supported by both the Democratic and Republican Parties, the twin parties of the ruling class.

These struggles must be linked to an elimination of student debt and the subordination of academic life to profit and political interests. However, none of these problems can be solved on isolated campuses.

To conduct such a struggle, academic workers must fight for the political mobilization of the working class, independent of the unions and the Democratic Party. Such action would win broad support, including from students and youth, faculty and educators, healthcare and transit workers, as well as industrial workers, who all confront a no less aggressive offensive on their jobs and working conditions in the midst of the pandemic.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality—the youth movement of the Socialist Equality Party—fights for the formation of rank-and-file workers' organizations of international mass struggle, which must go hand-in-hand with the fight for socialism and the building of socialist consciousness among students and youth. We call on all those who agree with this perspective to contact us and become active in the fight for socialism.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact