Striking part-time faculty at The New School vote on “last, best, and final” offer

Daniel de Vries
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Nearly two weeks into their strike, part-time faculty at The New School are voting this week on the university’s “last, best, and final” offer. The proposal, alongside administration threats to unilaterally impose it, is a provocative attempt to extract massive concessions from the adjunct professors and defeat their strike.

Although United Auto Workers bargainers have called for a “no” vote, the UAW bureaucracy has publicly stated its willingness to retreat even further on its already inadequate wage demands. At the same time, the UAW has done nothing to mobilize UAW members and broader sections of the working class in New York City to win the strike.

There is a vast chasm between what workers need to live and what the private university is attempting to force through. Part-time faculty at The New School are struggling against impossibly low wages amid a soaring cost of living. They have joined a wave of academic worker struggles, most notably the strike of 48,000 graduate students in the University of California system, for substantial wage increases and cost-of-living protections.

The deal offered by The New School amounts to a massive pay cut. Since 2018—the last time part-time faculty received a raise—inflation has gone up by 19 percent. Now, over the next five years, the administration is offering nominal pay increases of just 18 percent. If prices continue to rise at their current rate, it would mean that wages of part-time faculty would decrease by more than a quarter in real terms compared to 2018.

The proposed base pay for a semester-long course this academic year is $4,600, equivalent to just 5.1 percent of the annualized “living wage” for an adult with a child in the New York City area, according to MIT’s living wage calculator. At these levels, academic workers have no choice but to take multiple jobs to survive.

The attacks don’t stop with wages. The offer includes major health care givebacks, potentially raising the cost of premiums by up to 95 percent by the end of the contract. This would force many workers off their current health plan with only a high-deductible plan unsuitable for anyone with chronic health problems to replace it.

For all the proclamations of millionaire New School President Dwight McBride about offering a “fair and equitable agreement that works for everyone,” the massive increase in health care costs—amid a pandemic that has killed more than 40,000 people and disabled countless more in New York City alone—exposes the anti-worker character of the administration at the “progressive” institution.

The New School, where 87 percent of instructors are part-time, has been at the fore in academia of the decades-long shift away from secure tenured appointments towards contingent faculty whose employment and workload are subject to the whims of administrators. The trend in the universities is mirrored throughout the economy, including at other UAW-organized workplaces, where auto manufacturers have vastly expanded their use of low-paid temporary and part-time workers and created multiple compensation tiers.

The New School’s contract offer not only maintains the current, highly-exploitative structure but further undermines job security of part-time faculty by allowing the university to lower base teaching loads to zero.

Among striking workers, there is widespread contempt for the offer. Several on the picket line told WSWS reporters

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the deal was a “slap in the face.”

Tom, a striking adjunct at the Mannes School of Music, said, “It’s really unconscionable what is being proposed. I just hope the university can wake up and realize that there are real humans on the other side of the table that need the support and need to be paid for what they do.”

“We feel that we’re at the bottom of the totem pole, to be quite honest,” Tom added.

Faced with the huge opposition to the offer, the bargaining committee of UAW is calling for a “no” vote and a continuation of the strike, at least for the time being. However, the union bureaucracy has made clear in its public communications that it “remains willing to make further movement on its economic demands, bringing down their cost to reach a deal.” The UAW has already conceded to wage increases drastically below inflation. Its current proposal includes effective annual raises (going back to 2018) for instructors of lectures and seminars of just 3.66 percent.

The bargaining committee has also stressed its willingness to engage in mediation, which is often used to shut down strikes and force through agreements that would otherwise fail amid mass opposition.

The moves by the UAW apparatus at the University of California provide a preview of where the strike in New York City is headed, absent an intervention by the rank-and-file. On Tuesday, UAW bargainers agreed to a tentative deal after dropping the central Cost of Living Adjustment demand and meeting none of the needs of student workers in California.

At The New School, union officials are advancing the conception that the strike can be won by convincing the administration to redirect funds from administrative salaries to part-time faculty. There are certainly obscene compensation packages for campus executives like President McBride, who lives in a $15 million university residence and receives more than a million a year. But the UAW’s framework serves to isolate striking New School part-time faculty from fellow workers by accepting the budgetary limits set by the corporate interests who dominate the university and its board of trustees.

It is a framework shared by the New School administration, which agrees on a zero-sum game, but seeks to pit the demands of faculty against the needs of students to keep the already exorbitant tuition of over $50,000 a year in place.

Notably, many students have come out to the picket line in support of striking faculty. However, the university is seeking to exploit the fact that financial aid and visas for international students are contingent upon sufficient academic progress.

Throughout the working class, there is immense support and potential for a common struggle, not only limited to striking academic workers on both coasts. Hundreds of thousands of New York City municipal workers, including 75,000 teachers, have been without a contract since September, herded back into unsafe classrooms and offices after experiencing the most traumatizing years of their careers. More than 110,000 rail workers in the US are in an all-out confrontation with Congress and the Biden administration, which is seeking to outlaw a strike and impose a government-brokered, pro-company deal on them, which they have already rejected.

A “no” vote on the New School’s outrageous proposal is necessary, but it must be the first step in a counteroffensive of rank-and-file workers. Striking New School workers should follow the lead of autoworkers, rail workers, educators, nurses and other workers by forming rank-and-file committees to take direct control of their struggle. This is what Mack Trucks worker and socialist candidate for UAW president Will Lehman discussed with strikers when he visited their picket lines on November 19.

The committees are needed to resist attempts by the bureaucracy to shut down the strike and ram through another concessions-laden deal. At the same time, the committee should outline demands based on what workers need, and fight to mobilize other sections of workers in a unified struggle to achieve those demands.

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