

New School administrators step up strikebreaking threats after part-time faculty reject “final” offer

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Administrators at The New School are stepping up their threats to bring in replacements after striking adjunct professors overwhelmingly rejected the “last, best and final” offer from the private university in New York City. Nearly 2,000 part-time faculty members, members of the United Auto Workers Local 7902, have been on strike since November 16 to fight for livable wages, better health care coverage and job security.

Last Thursday, the striking workers voted down the insulting deal, which contained a massive cut in real wages and higher insurance premiums, by 95 percent, with 1,821 workers voting “no” and only 88 “yes.” Part-time faculty, who make up 87 percent of The New School faculty, haven’t received a pay raise in four years.

Although there is widespread support from students, faculty and other sections of workers at the university and outside to broaden the struggle, the United Auto Workers union has isolated the strike, kept students on starvation level strike benefits and signaled its willingness to lower its wage and other demands. Following the contract rejection, UAW Local 7902 immediately agreed to the The New School administration’s long-standing request for federal mediation.

This has only emboldened university administrators. Over the weekend, a student group released a leaked email from The New Schools Talent Engagement Coordinator, which made clear that the university is seeking to hire “supplemental graders” from outside the school to grade students if the strike continues.

The email said potential applicants could be assigned “a student in the Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) program in Fashion Design,” but “need not have a background in the tools used to design clothing patterns or in fabric draping and sewing but will review the stated learning outcomes and the student’s submitted work to determine sufficient progress toward those outcomes.” There were similar descriptions for other majors saying strikebreakers did not need any particular background to grade students.

The release of the email provoked widespread anger from striking workers and students. As of this writing, nearly 3,000 students, parents and others have signed a change.org petition

denouncing the plan, saying, “We came to the New School and paid good money to be taught and graded by legitimate professionals, and putting our grades in the hands of untrained, un-vetted temps is a complete betrayal of The New School’s duty to us as students and could result in serious damage to our academic transcripts. Additionally, it is a massive waste of our tuition dollars to hire hundreds of temp workers when that money could be better spent just paying the professors we already have, who are desperate for a contract that will bring them back to the classroom!”

The petition signers refused to be graded by strikebreakers, or to meet with anyone but their own professors for grading purposes.

New School officials tried to distance themselves from the leaked email, tweeting that it was a “an unfinished and unapproved draft that should not have been sent.” Nevertheless, Tokumbo Shobowale, Executive Vice President for Business and Operations, warned, “[I]n case the union decides to continue its strike for an extended period—something we are trying hard to resolve with a fair and financially responsible new contract—we must consider a range of potential options to ensure our students’ academic futures are secure.”

Shobowale, who makes almost half a million a year, suggested that the university had no choice but to make these strikebreaking plans because it had to meet regulatory requirements of grading students in order to maintain the university’s accreditation standards. In a thinly veiled threat against students, he added, “Our plans must protect our students from the very real risks associated with incomplete instruction or un-filed grades, including risks of non-compliance with the terms of their visas, jeopardizing students’ ability to graduate on time, and potentially altering financial aid eligibility.”

New School students have widely supported their teachers and have been active on the picket line. On Wednesday, a rally took place where students who had joined the pickets spoke out.

A fourth year student told the crowd, “It is ironic for a school that claims progressive values that the staff must strike to get a

fair wage. As students we fully support our teachers and if we all stand together they cannot stop us.”

Another student, Milo, said, “We pay a lot of money to go to school here! It should be going to our teachers. They are the ones who provide for us. The Administration on the other hand does nothing and they do not care about us.”

One student studying for her Master’s in Fine Arts told the crowd that her spouse was previously an adjunct at the New School for five years, and that it was “brutal.” “I support this strike because it’s not only on behalf of the current staff but for all who want to teach in the future.”

A graduate student who works at The New School told the strikers, “It has been inspiring to see students and teachers come together like this.” He added that as the contract for graduate student workers is also nearing expiration the university has begun threatening international students that their visas could be revoked if they take strike action. He concluded, “It is absurd that we pay this much and the administration makes millions of dollars while claiming there is no money for teachers.”

In response to the strikebreaking threats, full-time faculty also issued a statement in support for their part-time counterparts: “The Faculty of the New School for Social Research stands in solidarity with all Part-Time Faculty at the New School and will not cross a picket line as long as their union remains on strike. Part-Time Faculty have a basic right to fair and just working conditions; it is essential to social justice that no individual should have conditions of work imposed on them without their agreement. Our confidence in the administration depends on their willingness to negotiate with the union in good faith.”

The three-week struggle at The New School is at a decisive turning point. The use of a third-party mediator in contract negotiations has been a tried and tested tactic by unions and employers to sell concessionary agreements to workers and bully them into believing that anything better is neither “affordable” nor “practical.” This is exactly what the UAW did last year in the Columbia student worker strike for their first contract. Mediation provides the union bureaucracy with cover for agreeing to demands that under other circumstances would be rejected outright by the rank-and-file.

The UAW and administration bargaining teams had their first mediation session on Thursday, with Commissioner Bill Domini from the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service serving as mediator. Domini has over three decades of serving as a union bureaucrat for the Teamsters, Hotel Employees Restaurant Employees International Union (HERE) and United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW), serving various roles as Local President, Secretary Treasurer, Business Agent, and District Council Vice President. He earned \$154,047 in 2010 with UFCW, according to unionfacts.com,

and earned \$138,397 in 2021 as mediator, according to govsalaries.com.

In response to Domini, the university stated, “We have worked with Commissioner Domini before, in connection with a different set of union negotiations, and look forward to working with him once again.”

If the struggle by part-time faculty at The New School is to succeed, it must be taken out of the hands of the UAW—which has refused to broaden or publicize the strike or link it up with the 48,000-strong University of California (UC) academic worker striking for similar demands—and into the hands of the rank-and-file.

The UC strike is currently at a critical juncture, with the leadership of UAW Local 5810 reaching tentative agreements for 11,000 postdoc and academic researchers, which contain inadequate wage increases and have dropped a main demand of workers for cost-of-living increase (COLA) provisions.

The founding statement of the UC Rank-and-File Strike Committee states: “The task of this committee is to formulate the bottom-line demands for any contract we will accept. It will unify all striking workers against efforts to divide and weaken our strike and reach out to the broadest sections of the working class for a coordinated fight,” including dock workers, autoworkers and railroad workers, health care workers, educators and other sections of the working class.

Striking workers in New York City, which also includes 250 UAW HarperCollins workers, should look to this independent initiative of striking academic workers in California and form rank-and-file committees to fight against the attempts to betray their strikes, taking direct control over their struggles while linking up with workers throughout the city and across the US and internationally in a unified offensive of the working class to fight for what workers actually need.



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