

After shutting down strike, UAW pushes through sellout contract for New School part-time faculty

Elliott Murtagh
5 January 2023

On New Year's Eve, United Auto Worker (UAW) Local 7902 announced the ratification of a five-year contract for part-time faculty at The New School in New York City. The final reported vote tally was 1575 "yes" to 50 "no." The vote followed the shutdown of a four-week strike without workers having had the chance to vote on the new deal, which was released to the membership two and a half weeks after the pickets were taken down.

While the UAW hails the deal as a great victory, the contract does not meet workers' demands for adequate compensation and job security that faculty have been fighting for.

Adjuncts, who make up an overwhelming 87 percent of the school's teaching staff, had not seen a raise since 2018, but the compensation increases in the new contract fall well below the estimated 19 percent rise in the cost of living since then. The union leadership has openly admitted the contract's compensation rates are still low and below that of comparable universities, like New York University.

The new contract dropped a key demand of part-time faculty for job security, merely switching the necessary time to become "annualized"—the process by which the university reappoints faculty each year—by one semester, while still leaving the university a free hand to fire workers anytime before.

The contract also includes a "no strike" clause for its five-year duration, prohibiting "any member of the bargaining unit to call, instigate, engage or participate in or encourage or sanction any strike, sympathy strike, sit-down, slow-down or stoppage of work." Any worker caught engaging in any organized or common action against their employer is "subject to disciplinary action, including discharge."

The contract ratification in New York follows the shutdown and betrayal of the six-week strike by 48,000 University of California (UC) academic workers against the soaring cost of living after the UAW dropped key demands like Cost-of-Living-Adjustment (COLA). The UAW, with

the support of the Democratic Party, pushed through sellout contracts in California, despite a significant opposition of nearly 40 percent by UC graduate student teachers who voted "no."

The vote at the New School was the culmination of thoroughly anti-democratic methods by the union bureaucracy. On December 10, the UAW bargaining team announced that they had reached a tentative agreement (TA) with the university, shared a document of contract highlights and called off the strike. The strike was ended at the very point in which part-time faculty had the most power in withholding grades for students.

But the union never even released a TA to its membership or put it to a vote before ending the strike. Indeed, no full written agreement even existed at the time. This was proven by a December 23 letter sent by university president Dwight McBride denouncing the union's bargaining committee for "demanding new changes." In response, the union posted on their Instagram account: "The union and the university have been meeting regularly since a tentative agreement was reached *in principle* on Dec. 13 [emphasis added]. Both parties have been working to consolidate drafts and produce a single contract document for distribution. ...We will be sending the full and finalized text of the agreement to our members when it's ready."

On December 26, the day after Christmas when attendance was virtually guaranteed to be minimal, the union held a membership meeting to discuss the finalized TA that was just arrived at. On December 27, the union finally released the full agreement, giving faculty only four days in the middle of the holiday season to vote on it.

One part-time faculty member took to social media to denounce the contract: "Hey @UAW7902, if admin effectively fires or lays off large swathes of pt [part-time] faculty, especially the ones on the verge of some job security, due to 'enrollment declines,' what will all of these great benefits do for them? And make no mistake: that will

happen, is happening.

“What happened to those demands? Because it is also the most fundamental demand: All those benefits you bargained it away for won’t matter to people no longer employed there. McBride and his McKinsey thieves know that. They out-manuevered you.

“From 11 to 10 semesters to ‘annualization’? A joke. The strike’s most radical demand was job security, retroactively, an end to those ninth class cut-offs. Radical because it cut to the root of the precarity, the adjunctification, the two tiered system that is Customer Service U.

“The goal is not the institutionalization of precarity with some marginally better benefits. The goal is the abolition of the gig prof: the conversion of pt to ft [full-time] lines.

“People are going to get cut off now, especially people on the verge of some security. There was a lot of talk about ending that practice. What happened? Because I bet it increases under the new contract as is. I am voting ‘no’ on this contract. The admin is still winning.”

During the ratification vote, the same adjunct stated, “I just voted ‘no’ on @UAW7902 New School Lecturers’ Potemkin contract. In bargaining away our job security demands, the bargaining committee has ensured class cancellations and layoffs, revealing all of the new benefits as more of McBride’s meretricious baubles: a win for an execrable admin. NO.”

The New School adjunct’s agreement has been hailed in the pseudo-left press. *Jacobin*, the Democratic Socialists of America’s (DSA) semi-official publication, ran an interview article on December 20, entitled, “How the New School’s striking faculty forced concessions from their administration.” But one is left wondering who conceded to who after reading the article, in which bargaining committee members give lengthy excuses for the fact that the deal falls far short of faculty demands.

Parsons adjunct and UAW 7902 bargaining committee member Elizabeth Torres told *Jacobin*, “In the beginning, we were like, ‘Let’s shoot for the moon.’ At this point, not everyone is going to be satisfied. Not everyone is going to be happy. Not everyone is going to understand the full impact. But I think this tentative agreement is groundbreaking.”

Another bargaining committee member, Oliver Kellhammer, said, “It’s not perfect. It was a battle; it was a slugfest to get everything, and there were some losses.” In reality, by shutting down the strike, the BC was acting deliberately to enforce a sellout. “One of those things was grievability of issues like discrimination and harassment, which doesn’t cost the university any money, but to have a union lawyer present if you’re grieving is very powerful.”

“So, we lost on some of those nonfinancial things, and

they hurt. We did not get as much money as we hoped. We did pretty well, but as Liz said, we shot for the moon. So, there was very much a lot of realpolitik, a lot of horse trading, to get to where we were.”

Throughout The New School strike, the UAW 7902 leadership had a clear orientation towards propping up the Democratic Party and the trade union apparatus.

In an earlier *Jacobin* article published during the strike, UAW bargaining committee member Lee-Sean Huang was asked about the union’s plan to win the strike and how it will be able to force concessions from the university. In his response, Huang raised the Democratic officials frequenting the picket line with full support from union leadership. “We’ve had the support of elected officials. Ron T. Kim, the state assembly member, is also part-time faculty of the New School. ... Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez shared one of our photos from our picket line. And there was an open letter among city council members and state assembly members that’s being drafted and asking for people to sign on right now.”

In other words, the BC was propping up illusions in the very same capitalist party which was leading the charge, at the exact same time, to ban a strike and impose a concessions contract on 120,000 railroaders. Ocasio-Cortez was one of three members of the Democratic Socialists of America in the House who voted to impose that deal.

The experience at the New School is fresh confirmation that workers are fighting against not only management but the pro-capitalist trade union bureaucracy. The crucial lesson to draw is that workers must organize rank-and-file committees, independent of the apparatus, to enforce democratic control over their own struggles.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact