

UAW keeps Columbia University postdoctoral workers on the job after overwhelming strike authorization vote

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More than 1,000 postdoctoral workers and research assistants at Columbia University in New York City, members of the Columbia Postdoctoral Workers-United Auto Workers (CPW-UAW) Local 4100, have been kept on the job for over two months after the expiration of their contract with the multibillion-dollar academic institution.

The effort to prevent a strike by Columbia educators takes place as the UAW bureaucracy seeks to prevent a unified walkout by nearly 150,000 General Motors, Ford and Stellantis workers. Instead, UAW President Shawn Fain is conducting a phony “stand up” strike that has kept 90 percent of the membership at work.

On August 28, the CPW-UAW leaders announced that a strike had been authorized by 98 percent of the 962 ballots cast. The previous contract between the CPW-UAW and Columbia University expired in June.

Simultaneously, hundreds of postdocs at Mount Sinai Health System in New York City, that are set to affiliate with the UAW, overwhelmingly authorized a strike. They are pushing for their first union-negotiated contract with the multimillion-dollar hospital system.

Postdocs and associate researchers at Columbia and Mount Sinai are demanding pay increases and wage adjustments for inflation, improved visa and financial support for international researchers, improved benefits and healthcare for fellows and on-site childcare centers. Confronting skyrocketing housing costs, they are also calling for rent stipends and greater access to university housing, along with increased transparency on authorship and intellectual property.

Poverty pay, housing insecurity, lack of decent healthcare coverage and other benefits are the norm for the vast majority of academic workers.

Columbia University, with an annual endowment of over \$13 billion, billions of dollars’ worth of property

holdings in New York City and hundreds of millions of dollars raked in from undergraduate tuition and fees annually, has done nothing but hurl insulting offers to the postdocs.

Despite the clear position of the university over the last five months since contract talks began, the CPW-UAW leadership has repeatedly delayed any strike action and has yet to set a strike date.

The demands being put forward by the CPW-UAW are not significantly better than those of Columbia. According to CPW-UAW President Cora Bergantinos-Crespo, speaking with the *Columbia Spectator*, as of July 31, the union is asking for a \$5,000 stipend and equal rights for fellows, a \$7,500 stipend for housing, and a \$250,000 fund for hardships confronting union members. The union has also demanded a combined \$15,500 fund for childcare, a minimum salary of \$75,000 for postdoctoral workers and \$89,076 for associate researchers, and a yearly increase of 3 percent, as well as a 3.5 percent increase with experience.

This is a significant reduction of the CPW-UAW’s initial key demand, which included a starting salary of \$90,000, a childcare subsidy of \$10,000 per each child under 14 and an on-site childcare center for each of the four main campuses.

The offers and counter-offers fall far from what is needed to survive in one of the most expensive and unequal cities in the world.

In 2022, more than 100 billionaires, the largest number of any city internationally, resided in New York. Meanwhile, one in five New Yorkers live in poverty and nearly half of the city’s households are considered poor. The average overall rent in Manhattan is presently hovering close to \$6,000 per month. Average rent for a one-bedroom apartment is around \$4,000 per month.

A report published earlier this year by the Fund for the City of New York explains that a household income of \$100,000 is required for a *decent* standard of living in New York. While “only” 16 percent of New York City’s population fall below the official poverty line, in reality 50 percent fall below the level of an adequate standard of living.

Millions are living in or on the edge of poverty in New York, working multiple jobs to try to put food on the table. This includes many postdocs, research assistants, adjunct instructors, graduate student workers and other university employees. At Mount Sinai, a multimillion-dollar hospital system, the starting pay for postdocs is just over \$58,000, well below a livable income. Columbia postdocs and researchers are no better off.

Postdocs and research associates at Columbia and Mount Sinai have demonstrated their determination to fight. To advance their struggle, they should not only call for a strike, but above all fight to link up their struggle with that of autoworkers and other sections of the working class.

The chief obstacle to this is the UAW bureaucracy. Like other unions, the UAW is dominated by a pro-company apparatus, consisting of hundreds of officials with incomes that put them in the top 5 percent of income earners, that has done nothing but sell out the struggles of the rank-and-file membership for decades.

Working with the Biden administration, Senator Bernie Sanders and the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), UAW President Shawn Fain is trying to strangle the powerful struggle by autoworkers to win back decades of UAW-backed concessions.

Despite a 97 percent strike authorization vote and a parallel struggle by autoworkers in Canada, the UAW called walkouts at only three plants to ensure that the strike would have minimal impact and remain isolated. As the WSWS noted, the “strategy” designed by Fain and the UAW apparatus is, essentially, a ‘back to work’ order disguised as a ‘strike.’”

The decision to not call a strike at Columbia or Mount Sinai is part of this strategy of suppressing the class struggle and ramming through contracts that are entirely acceptable to the corporate and political establishment and its war against the working class.

While the UAW has expanded in recent years on the university campuses, its role on the campuses has been essentially the same as in the auto plants. From 2021 to the beginning of 2022, the UAW bureaucracy played a key role in defeating the strikes of NYU and Columbia

graduate student workers as well as the largest academic strike in decades in the University of California system. All of the contracts negotiated by the UAW included cuts in real wages, inadequate money for health care expenses and no serious protections against the raging COVID-19 pandemic.

In order to avoid a similar fate in their current struggle, Columbia University postdoctoral workers must adopt an entirely different strategy based on the fight to transfer power and decision making from the UAW apparatus to the workers themselves. This means organizing rank-and-file committees so postdoctoral workers can take control of their struggle, advance demands based on their actual needs, and coordinate their struggle with other sections of the working class in the US and internationally.

It is critical to understand the political and class forces university workers are fighting. The Columbia Board of Trustees is run by a collection of multimillionaire and billionaire hedge fund managers and CEOs with deep ties to Wall Street, Corporate America, both corporate-controlled parties and the military-industrial complex. To take on these forces, university workers must oppose the UAW’s efforts to subordinate their struggle to the Democratic Party, a party of Wall Street, austerity and never-ending wars, which is no less an enemy of the working class than Trump and the Republicans.

Therefore, university workers must fight to unite with autoworkers and broader sections of the working class in a direct struggle against capitalism and for socialism, that is, social equality. This requires a fight against the pseudo-left politics of the DSA and other organizations of the affluent middle class, which do everything to divide the working class and subordinate it to the Democratic Party.

We urge postdoctoral students and researchers at Columbia University and Mount Sinai Health System who want to discuss this perspective with us to reach out to the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE).



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact