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Mount Sinai postdoctoral medical researchers speak to the WSWS on their struggle

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The United Auto Workers (UAW)-affiliated Sinai Postdoctoral Organizing Committee (SPOC), a union containing over 500 medical researchers at the Icahn Medical Institute in New York City (Formerly Mount Sinai School of Medicine), conducted an “Informational Picket” last Thursday. Amidst the ongoing struggle in the auto industry, the UAW bureaucracy has refused to set a strike deadline even after 91 percent of those polled voted in favor of a strike in late August.

SPOC is a member of UAW local 4100, which also contains roughly 1,700 postdoctoral researchers at Columbia University organized in the Columbia Postdoctoral Workers (CPW) union. The CPW also voted to authorize a strike earlier this summer by a near-unanimous margin, or 98 percent of around 1,000 ballots returned. As is the case at Mount Sinai, the CPW has failed to announce a strike date.

Postdoctoral researchers both in SPOC-UAW and CPW-UAW face abject working conditions, with starting yearly wages for Sinai workers at \$58,000, falling far short of the Manhattan locale’s average rent price of around \$6,000 per month, or \$72,000 per year. Skyrocketing inflation has steadily eroded the living standards of these workers, many of whom have families and have emigrated from countries around the world to pursue their careers. The Institute has a three-year subsidized housing program available for postdoctoral workers, but it has been widely described by employees as inadequate to meet their needs.

While the overwhelming support for a strike by UAW 4100 workers reflects the sharp opposition of postdoctoral researchers to the issues facing broad layers of workers in academia, the initiatives by the union leadership represent efforts to isolate and contain their fight.

A *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team attended Thursday’s event at Mount Sinai and spoke to researchers on the picket. Many were not even aware that researchers in their own local had similarly authorized a strike, and a majority were also not aware of the fact that nearly 145,000 UAW-affiliated autoworkers across the Big Three auto companies had similarly voted to authorize a strike by a margin of 97 percent.

Speaking of the precariousness that many postdoctoral workers face, John, a postdoctoral researcher at Mount Sinai, told the

WSWS, “I and many others here are internationals, and if we do not have good protection for our job we can easily lose it, but not for serious reasons. Then, if we cannot find another job within three months, we can be made to leave America. In my previous job, my supervisor threatened not to give me a reference, which I needed to get my job here.”

He continued, “[e]verything is increasing in price. We do important research and also then become the professors teaching others. But we could be making two or three times more than working here in academia.”

Responding to the call for Sinai researchers to unite their struggle with those of workers around the globe, John said, “[W]e have not thought to work together with other workers, and the union has not said any such thing. It would be good to unite together with nurses, doctors, other postdocs who... also voted to strike, [especially] like at Columbia.”

Another postdoctoral worker told the WSWS, “I just had a baby and have to pay for full time day care. There’s one day care available to us at Mount Sinai but its very hard to get a spot there. So we have to go to East Harlem because it’s cheaper there.

“We only get three years of subsidized housing from Mount Sinai and I was kicked out during my pregnancy. I think you cannot live with a child on a postdoc salary. I just got a raise and am now getting \$76,000 per year, and that’s more than what many others get. It’s starting as low as \$58,000. There’s no paid overtime. In our contract it says that we should work 37.5 hours, but I work at least 50 hours a week and I’m not the worst.”

A postdoc in the oncology department expressed enthusiasm about the WSWS article on the strike authorization vote by Columbia postdoctoral researchers and echoed her concerns about housing, “I’m in my third year, I joined the lab during COVID. At the time, rent in New York City was not that high but now it’s unbelievable and Mount Sinai only provides subsidized housing for 3 years. The biggest difference between New York City and other places is rent. They already have difficulties recruiting postdocs here for that reason.”

The conditions faced by postdoctoral workers at Columbia and

Mount Sinai are far from exceptional. The WSWS has reported on similar struggles across the country by academic workers within the last several years. This has included significant struggles by thousands of graduate and postdoctoral workers at universities such as the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, the University of Washington in Seattle and Rutgers University in 2023 alone.

The SPOC-UAW leadership is attempting to channel the opposition of postdoc workers into the demand for a “fair contract.” In reality, any outcome that meets the needs of academic workers is impossible outside of the expansion of the struggle to other sectors and industries, and a political turn to the broader struggles of the international working class.

While the union has not negotiated a contract with Mount Sinai since its incorporation into local 4100 last summer, Columbia postdoctoral employees ratified their first contract through the UAW in June of 2020.

The CPW contract, at the time hailed as a victory by union officials, was nothing of the sort. While the agreement provided for the creation of some internal mechanisms aimed at mitigating workplace bullying and harassment, the measures do nothing to substantially protect employees, particularly international workers who are bound by strict visa requirements. Minimum salaries negotiated by the UAW remain at an abysmally low \$60,000 per year, with minimum annual raises at 2.5 percent, well below the inflation rate. These are precisely the conditions that Columbia postdoctoral workers voted overwhelmingly to strike to oppose.

At the University of California, the UAW-negotiated sellout contract covering 48,000 striking academic workers, including 11,000 postdoctoral and academic researchers, fell far short of the initial demands advanced by employees. The call for a minimum starting salary of \$70,000 and Cost of Living Adjustments (COLA) were scrapped, with major concessions paving the way for fiscal attacks on the university system. Similarly, the UAW local 4121 contract for postdoctoral employees at the University of Washington maintains minimum salaries that are as low as \$54,000, with minimum annual pay raises as low as two percent.

The UAW bureaucracy is pursuing a strategy to preempt or at least delay a strike by postdoctoral workers at Mount Sinai as part of its efforts to contain, isolate and eventually sell out the struggle by autoworkers.

UAW president Shawn Fain is working with the automotive manufacturers and the Biden administration to keep the autoworkers’ struggle limited to actions that keep the majority of workers on the job and allow the bosses to continue to rake in profits. Only a handful of plants have been allowed to strike, while workers at the vast portion of factories essential to production have been ordered by Fain to remain working.

This heavily stage-managed action in the auto industry, dubbed the “Stand Up” strike, is part of a broader strategy by the companies, acting in partnership with Washington and the union bureaucracy, to massively restructure the entire industry in the transition to Electric Vehicles (EVs), boosting corporate profitability at the expense of the jobs, wages and living standards of the American working class. Last Tuesday, President Biden arrived in Detroit to visit the UAW picket in an attempt to bolster illusions in the thoroughly pro-corporate actions by the Fain

administration.

The SPOC leadership promoted Thursday’s event with the #StrikeReady hashtag, the imprint of the campaign by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) of the same name which was initiated earlier this year to promote the sellout contract for 340,000 workers at UPS. The DSA have heavily supported and reinforced Fain and the phony UAW “stand-up strike,” as well as efforts to channel autoworkers’ opposition back into the politics of the Democratic Party, whose primary concern is to block the development of a movement in the working class under conditions where it aggressively pursues the war against Russia in Ukraine.

In opposition to the pro-war and pro-capitalist politics of the Democrats and their backers in the DSA, postdoctoral workers must orient their struggles toward the growing rebellion of the working class against the corporations, Wall Street and their partners in the labor apparatuses.

On Saturday, the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network, part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank and File Committees (IWA-RFC) published a statement which called for an “all-out offensive against the Big Three” to fight to win back decades of concessions wrested from workers by the corporations, with the help of the UAW union bureaucracy. The statement said the following:

Brothers and sisters: If we are going to win this fight, we must take control of it! Demand local meetings to pass resolutions for an all-out strike. And if the UAW won’t organize meetings, call them yourselves.

The UAW bureaucracy is completely hostile to any action which would actually be effective against the companies. Therefore, workers require rank-and-file committees in every plant and warehouse so that the will of the majority for an industry-wide strike can be realized.

A turn by researchers toward the movement of rank and file workers would give a tremendous impetus to the struggles of academic workers, many of whom are organized under the same bureaucracy as autoworkers. We urge academic workers interested in building the leadership for these struggles to contact the IYSSE today.



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