

# Union belatedly sets strike date for postdoctoral workers at Icahn School of Medicine in New York

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4 December 2023

The Sinai Postdoctoral Organizing Committee (SPOC) set a strike date of December 6 for more than 500 medical researchers at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York. The union's action came more than three months after its members voted to strike by 91 percent. This delay is a clear indication that SPOC is seeking to avoid a strike and will use any pretext to call it off at the last minute.

The Mount Sinai postdoctoral workers are demanding pay increases and wage adjustments for inflation, improved visa and financial support for international researchers, better benefits and healthcare for fellows, and on-site childcare centers. Faced with ever-rising housing costs, they are also calling for rent stipends and greater access to university housing. Finally, they seek increased transparency on authorship and intellectual property. For more than a year, Mount Sinai has engaged in stalling tactics and attempted to intimidate international postdocs.

SPOC is a member of United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 4100. It has sought to maintain its credibility by filing several unfair labor practice charges against Mount Sinai with the National Labor Relations Board. It held an informational picket on September 28 to vent workers' frustration and present itself as willing to fight.

But the Mount Sinai postdocs should take warning from recent developments within their own local. Less than a month before SPOC-UAW set a strike date, Columbia Postdoctoral Workers (CPW)-UAW Local 4100 called off a strike at Columbia University, also in New York, on the day before it was scheduled to begin. The union leadership then pushed through a sellout contract.

Under the agreement, minimum compensation for starting Columbia postdocs will be \$70,000 and increase by \$1,000 with each year of service. Current postdocs whose salaries do not meet these minimums will receive a one-time ratification salary adjustment. These salaries are entirely inadequate. A recent study by the Fund for the City of New York showed that an annual salary of at least \$100,000 was needed to live comfortably in the city. In addition, the contract provides Columbia postdoctoral workers with 3 percent raises in 2024 and 2025. These raises are less than the 3.2 percent rate of inflation for the 12 months ended in October, meaning that the postdocs will fall behind.

Columbia flatly rejected the postdocs' demand for a \$7,000 housing stipend. Instead, the contract creates a \$500,000 hardship support fund to support postdoctoral workers with unanticipated medical emergencies or other expenses. Postdocs may receive up to \$5,000 per academic year, but each request must be evaluated, "and not all requests will be funded," according to the agreement. Funds that remain unused at the end of the contract will not be rolled over into the hardship support fund of the next contract, nor is the continuation of the fund assured.

Regarding copyright and intellectual property, which are crucial issues related to the postdocs' research, the university is required to do nothing more than meet "as needed" with "Columbia Tech Ventures and/or other appropriate University representatives and representatives from the Union to discuss and answer questions and bring suggestions about the University's Copyright and Intellectual Property policy." The contract provides no concrete protections for the postdocs.

The section on support for international workers, who represent 70 percent of the postdocs, promises little and completely depends on the good faith of the administration.

The CPW-UAW has worked consistently to block any struggle. It kept workers on the job after the contract expired in June and delayed a strike vote until August, which was around the same time as SPOC-UAW members voted to strike. Although CPW-UAW members and SPOC-UAW members are in the same local, union leadership at these workplaces made no effort to combine their struggles. In fact, Mount Sinai workers participating in the informational picket in September told the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) that they were unaware that contract negotiations were being held at Columbia.

Elsy El Khoury, a postdoc in Columbia's chemistry department and representative for CPW-UAW, revealingly told the *Columbia Spectator* that the new contract seemed to be the best the union could get without moving to strike. El Khoury claimed that postdocs wanted to avoid a strike, because "all of us really care about our research and what we do." But if postdocs wanted to avoid a strike, then why did they authorize one in a vote of 91 percent? Furthermore, how does "really caring" about one's research preclude the desire to be fairly compensated for it?

This treachery reflects the character of the UAW—the union of which CPW and SPOC are members. Like the other trade unions, the UAW has a decades-long record of concessionary contracts that have increased its members' workloads and reduced their standard of living. This year, UAW President Shawn Fain (a self-styled militant and reformer) called phony "stand-up strikes" at General Motors, Ford and Stellantis that left most workers on the job. Having weakened the strike, Fain forced through pro-company contracts. When workers at Mack Trucks rejected a contract that Fain had endorsed, Fain brought back the same contract and forced its ratification by using threats and intimidation. To carry out these betrayals, Fain has worked closely with the Biden administration, which is intent on suppressing workers' opposition so that it can continue waging war in Ukraine and Gaza.

The UAW has betrayed student workers time and again. In late November, it blocked a strike of 3,200 graduate student workers at the University of Southern

California by announcing a last-minute, pro-administration deal that has not yet been ratified. Last year, it pushed through a contract for 12,000 postdocs and academic researchers at the New School in New York City that did not meet the workers' demands for substantial raises and cost-of-living adjustments.

As the WSWS previously warned, "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."

The Mount Sinai postdocs can have no faith in SPOC-UAW. To prevent a betrayal, they must take the struggle into their own hands by forming a rank-and-file committee that is independent of the treacherous union and of both political parties. The fight for a decent standard of living for academic workers ultimately is inseparable from the fight against the for-profit health and education systems. The goal must be to establish workers' control and socialism.



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