

Postdoctoral workers at Icahn School of Medicine in New York begin strike

Robert Milkowski
7 December 2023

Over 500 medical researchers went out on strike Wednesday morning, three months after the membership voted to strike by 91 percent. They are members of the Sinai Postdoctoral Organizing Committee (SPOC), which is affiliated with the United Auto Workers (UAW).

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 increased transparency on authorship and intellectual property.

The strikers also seek onsite childcare centers and, faced with ever-rising housing costs, they are calling for rent stipends and greater access to university housing. Many postdoctoral workers have stressed to the WSWS that their difficult living conditions are making it extremely difficult for them to focus on their scientific work.

One international postdoctoral worker on the picket line explained to the WSWS, “we only receive subsidized housing for three years but the average postdoc works closer to five years, so three years is not a good time for subsidized housing to end and having to then go out and find an apartment with rent prices going through the roof.”

A striking medical researcher told the WSWS, “I’ve been here with my family for two-and-a-half years and our apartment lease in student housing is limited by the hospital to three years. Finding an affordable apartment after the lease expires will be very hard.”

When a WSWS reporter spoke about the mounting difficulties faced by working class families in all industries and the horrendous levels of social inequality in New York City, he observed “... other working class citizens have been walking by the picket line today and

they are saying, ‘yes, we need this!’ I think this strike is for them too.”

The principal task facing the postdoctoral workers is to turn to the broadest sections of the working class and expand their struggle. The main obstacle on this path is the role of SPOC-UAW bureaucracy, which will do everything to isolate and weaken the strike and prepare its sellout.

From the beginning, the union bureaucracy has worked to create conditions to isolate the struggle by postdoctoral workers. It only called the strike five months after an overwhelming strike authorization vote of 91 percent of the membership and over two months after an “informational picket” on September 28. Since then, the same local has sold out a struggle by Columbia postdoctoral workers, leaving Mount Sinai postdoctoral workers isolated in their struggle.

The contract that the union negotiated provided for raises that are less than the rate of inflation, no housing stipend, a lump sum payment for dependents rather than the per dependent payment demanded, no guarantees regarding copyright and intellectual property and nothing but “good faith” guarantees from the University regarding support for international workers, who make upwards of 70 percent of Columbia’s postdoctoral workers.

The UAW has systematically isolated a struggle by 150,000 autoworkers who overwhelmingly voted to go on strike. UAW President Shawn Fain, who is promoted by the Democratic Socialists of America—a pseudo-left faction of the Democratic Party—first sought to limit their struggle to phony “stand-up strikes” at General Motors, Ford and Stellantis, leaving most workers on the job. Having thus isolated the strikers, Fain then forced through pro-company contracts, leaving workers in the industry struggling to survive

and vulnerable to a planned jobs massacre.

These experiences must be a warning to postdoctoral workers at Mount Sinai. The UAW bureaucracy, which enjoys vast social privileges, is not acting on behalf of the interests of workers, but of those of management and, above all, the Democratic Party and the American ruling class as a whole.

The UAW, which also covers defense plants at General Dynamics and at Allison Transmission, has played a central role in enabling the supplying of weapons for the genocide in Gaza. It has ignored the call by the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions to “refuse to build weapons destined for Israel ... refuse to transport weapons to Israel ... [to] take action against complicit companies involved in implementing Israel’s brutal and illegal siege.”

Adapting to mass anti-war sentiment in order to capture and control it, the UAW issued a statement last week calling for a ceasefire. But it did not describe the actions of Israel as genocide and UAW President Shawn Fain has since said he supported the destruction of Hamas.

By contrast, socialist autoworker and 2022 UAW Presidential Candidate Will Lehman issued a statement on November 2 calling for workers to shut down the supply of weapons to Israel. The statement went viral and has been read more than 1 million times.

Their struggle is also unfolding amidst the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic which has now entered a new surge, centered on the Northeast and Midwest, and continues to pose a major threat to the lives and well-being of healthcare workers, researchers and their patients.

Even though New York hospitals were particularly hard hit by the pandemic, the SPOC-UAW does not even mention COVID-19 anymore. This is in line with the role that the UAW bureaucracy has played in enforcing the “herd immunity” policy of the ruling class, which has claimed over 1 million dead in the US alone and tens of millions of lives around the world.

In order for their strike to be successful, Mount Sinai postdoctoral workers must break out of the straitjacket of the union bureaucracy and connect their struggle to the unfolding working class movement against war and austerity in the US and internationally.

This means building a rank-and-file strike committee as part of the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-

and-File Committees. Such a committee would take the strike out of the hands of the UAW bureaucracy, place it under the democratic control of the rank and file, coordinate this struggle with workers across the city and internationally and organize a fight for demands that will meet the social and health needs of postdoctoral workers.

We urge all postdoctoral workers and other workers at Mount Sinai who are ready to discuss the next steps in this struggle to contact us today.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact