

Union pushes rotten contract onto Mount Sinai postdoctoral fellows

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The Sinai Postdoctoral Organizing Committee (SPOC), which is affiliated with the United Auto Workers (UAW), announced the ratification of a new contract with the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York on December 22. The agreement meets none of the important demands of the more than 500 postdoctoral workers who spent more than two weeks on the picket line.

The 98 percent vote in favor of the contract, which SPOC endorsed, is less a reflection of the postdocs' approval than of their belief that no positive gains would be made if the contract were rejected. More than 80 percent of the Mount Sinai postdoctoral fellows are international students who are highly susceptible to threats to their visas. This factor and the pressures of the upcoming Christmas holidays contributed to the ratification. Moreover, more than 100 eligible voters showed their lack of enthusiasm by not voting at all.

When SPOC was formed in 2022, the membership made clear its demands for improved wages, guaranteed housing and increased childcare that would make living in New York feasible. The Fund for the City of New York reported in 2023 that a household income of \$100,000 is required for a decent standard of living in New York, one of the world's most expensive cities. The postdocs' salaries were substantially lower and had not been adjusted since 2018.

But bargaining session notes show that SPOC initially demanded that the base salary for postdoctoral fellows be increased to \$90,000 per year. On December 5, one day before the strike, SPOC reported, "We also moved to a minimum compensation of \$74,000 and reduced the experience- and inflation-based increases to the minimum scale." They also admitted that "this move reduces the value of our salary proposal to almost to the level of Sinai's proposal."

The union ultimately settled for the hospital's final offer of \$72,500—less than three quarters of what the Fund for the City of New York estimated is required for a decent standard of living. SPOC officials tried to cover up their complete capitulation by bragging about having achieved the "highest minimum salaries for postdocs in the country." If true, this statement only underscores how poorly postdocs are paid.

From the outset, Mount Sinai denied the postdocs' demand for four years of guaranteed housing. Workers forced to find housing at the beginning of their fourth or fifth year face significant psychological and financial stress. In late September, a postdoctoral fellow told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "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."

On the first day of the strike, a postdoctoral worker on the picket line told 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." The worker added that rent prices are soaring. The new contract does not mention or abolish Mount Sinai's unwritten three-year limit.

In session highlights from December 5, SPOC officials wrote, "We simplified our proposal on childcare by accepting their rejection of a new reimbursement benefit, instead asking that Mount Sinai contribute \$5,000 annually to a Flexible Spending Account (FSA) for each postdoc, to be used for childcare expenses. Sinai already provides access to dependent care FSA but does not currently make contributions."

In the end, Mount Sinai refused to make FSA contributions. Instead, the tentative agreement

establishes an emergency fund of \$50,000 per year, or as much as \$150,000 over the life of the agreement, to cover childcare and housing expenses and reduce financial hardship. These funds amount to less than \$100 per postdoc per year, and workers who apply for assistance are not guaranteed to receive it.

None of the other putative gains secured in the contract will alleviate the postdoctoral fellows' economic pain. In the new year, prices will continue to climb.

Throughout the bargaining sessions, SPOC repeatedly mentioned that it was trying to secure terms like those in the recent agreement at Columbia University. The Columbia agreement includes raises that do not keep pace with inflation, makes no guarantees about intellectual property or copyright, provides only lip service to international workers and grants no housing stipend. Columbia Postdoctoral Workers-UAW (CPW-UAW) pushed this rotten agreement through in October to prevent a strike, even though the membership had voted for a walkout months before.

SPOC and CPW-UAW are affiliated with UAW Local 4100. The defeats that these unions have imposed on postdocs reflect the role of the UAW itself, which is to suppress workers' opposition and enforce the concessions that management demands.

The UAW's character was on public display during the recent strike at Ford, GM and Stellantis. Despite workers' overwhelming authorization vote at all three companies, UAW President Shawn Fain only called out workers at plants that would not hurt the companies' profits, and more than two thirds of workers stayed on the job. Fain ultimately imposed a contract that did not make up for the decline in workers' wages or fulfill demands like the restoration of retiree benefits and the elimination of tiers.

The UAW, like the other trade unions, also encourages workers to appeal to the pro-corporate Democratic Party for reforms, thus subordinating workers to the needs of Wall Street. The Democrats are currently refusing to acknowledge the ongoing pandemic—which has killed as many as 27 million people worldwide—and are supplying Israel with the bombs and intelligence to carry out a genocide against the people of Gaza.

As the WSWS wrote at the beginning of October, “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.”

In 2024, the mounting threats of dictatorial rule and world war will confront students and workers ever more clearly with the need to oppose the union bureaucracies and the two capitalist parties. These forces are bent on driving down wages to finance a new imperialist carve-up of the world. To win their demands, postdocs will need to establish rank-and-file committees that genuinely fight for their interests. This struggle is inseparable from the struggle for socialism. Postdoctoral workers who agree with this statement should contact the WSWS today to find out how to get involved.



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