

UAW shuts down academic student workers strike at The New School in New York City after 3 days

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11 March 2024

Work at The New School? Fill out the form below to tell us what you think about the tentative agreement and what you think workers should be fighting for. Comments will be published anonymously.

More than six months after the expiration of their previous labor contract, graduate and undergraduate academic student workers at The New School in New York City began striking against the prestigious private university last Wednesday. On Friday, less than three days after it began, the union leadership claimed it had won a “groundbreaking” tentative agreement and shut down the strike, without a vote by workers and without releasing the full details of the proposed contract.

Over 500 teaching assistants and fellows, research assistants and associates, course assistants and tutors, all members of the Student Employees at The New School (SENS) union, had launched their strike in order to win higher wages, improved healthcare benefits, access to a childcare fund and improved support for international students. SENS is a unit of United Auto Workers Local 7902, which has around 4,000 academic and student healthcare worker members at The New School. The UAW has increasingly expanded among academic workers in recent years, after hemorrhaging hundreds of thousands of members in the auto industry over the past four decades due to its collaboration with the corporations in closing plants and decimating jobs.

As of this writing, full details of the “groundbreaking” tentative agreement reached between the UAW and The New School administration have not been released. However, some of SENS-UAW’s very brief highlights of the three-year proposed contract already point to another sellout of academic workers:

- SENS has touted “raises between 24% and 31% for all academic student workers,” but even if taken at face value, these figures are far from adequate to provide a livable income in New York City, one of the world’s most expensive to live in. The lowest-paid student academic workers, course assistants, currently make \$17.67 an hour, barely more than New York City’s minimum wage of \$16. Research assistants, research associates, and tutors are all paid barely just over \$20 an hour at present, and even the highest paid job categories are not paid a sufficient amount to afford a decent standard of living in New York City. Moreover, the wage increases in the new agreement would fail to make up for six years of below-inflation raises of just 2 percent annually agreed to by the SENS-UAW in the previous contract.

- According to SENS, the university agreed to a legal assistance fund for international students of \$10,000. It will fall far short of the needs of international and immigrant students, whose legal situation in the US has dramatically worsened in recent years, as both the Republican and Democratic parties increasingly seek to scapegoat immigrants. A single deportation case in New York can cost up to \$10,000. Language about keeping “federal agencies” off campus to prevent detention and

deportation will be of no consequence for ICE and NYPD officers with warrants or working under cover, a practice frequently adopted, especially in immigration raids.

- A \$25,000 annual healthcare fund, with up to 60 percent reimbursement of dependent coverage premiums, will also prove insufficient for the over 500 student workers, even with the tiered healthcare discounts ranging from 50-80 percent. The amount being offered is a tiny fraction of the financial resources commanded by The New School, which charges \$54,000 annual undergraduate tuition. In addition, SENS admitted that it abandoned its members’ demands for dental insurance coverage.

- The three-year agreement will also include a “No Strike, No Lockout” clause. As it was during the 2022 strike by part-time faculty, this will be used by the university administration and the UAW bureaucracy to divide workers and isolate any future struggles that break out on campus in New York City or beyond.

A spokesperson for The New School made clear the university’s enthusiasm for the tentative agreement, stating, “This is a strong, fair, three-year contract. The union has ended the strike, and all university classes will resume as scheduled effective immediately.”

Student workers should ask themselves: If the administration is celebrating the deal, what has been conceded by the SENS-UAW that has not yet been revealed?

Workers should demand the immediate release of the full contract language and enough time to carefully study it before a ratification vote is held. If the union leadership refuses, workers should vote to reject the agreement on principle.

The national UAW bureaucracy, which controls SENS, has a long history of concealing concessions from workers in order to ram through sellout agreements, as it did among autoworkers during last year’s “stand up strikes.” Contrary to the presentation in the media of the contracts being “historic,” the UAW’s deals with the automakers were pro-corporate agreements, which have paved the way for mass firings of temporary workers and layoffs of full-time workers.

There is a fighting sentiment among student workers to win their demands and break out of their poverty wages. The struggle by academic workers is itself part of a wider upsurge of the class struggle internationally, which has seen growing strikes and other protests by autoworkers, healthcare workers, transit workers, educators, and other sections of the working class in recent years.

But to achieve their demands, New School student workers cannot leave their struggle in the hands of the corporatist UAW bureaucracy. They must take their struggle into their own hands and expand it by forming rank-and-file committees, joining up with other rank-and-file committees in the auto industry and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-

Skyrocketing cost of living in New York City

Coming nearly a year and a half after the UAW bureaucracy's betrayal of the four-week strike of part-time faculty at The New School in November-December 2022, academic student workers, members of the same union local as part-time faculty, are displaying the same courage and determination as their instructors to improve their lot in one of the most expensive and unlivable cities in the country.

Poverty pay, housing insecurity, lack of decent healthcare coverage and other benefits are the norm for the vast majority of academic workers. This is especially true in New York City, where the cost of living is more than double the national average, according to 2023 data from the Council for Community and Economic Research's Cost of Living Index.

The average monthly rent for a one-bedroom apartment in New York City is a staggering \$4,142, a 15 percent increase from the previous year, according to rental website Zumper. An individual would need an annual salary of more than \$115,000 in order to pay no more than 33 percent of their income on that amount of rent, according to a rental affordability calculator by real estate firm Zillow.

For a single person, monthly expenditure costs for groceries are approximately \$554.14. Around \$622.05 is needed to cover healthcare expenses each month. Additionally, utilities run around \$570.52, and transportation costs often exceed \$1,000 each month.

A recent study by personal finance site SmartAsset showed that in order to maintain a decent standard of living in New York, a family of four would have to make over \$300,000 a year. A report published last year by the Fund for the City of New York explains that while "only" 16 percent of New York City's population fall below the official poverty line (which is set at an absurdly low level), in reality over 50 percent fall below the level of an adequate standard of living.

The vast majority of academic student workers fall into this group. Increasingly unlivable circumstances lie behind the tremendous support for a strike among these workers. A strike authorization vote called by the SENS leadership last month saw 77 percent membership participation and passed with 94 percent support. It is undeniable that student workers at The New School have been raring for a fight.

Political issues in the academic workers struggle

The UAW bureaucracy brushed aside the expiration of the previous contract on September 1 and kept student workers on the job for over six months without a contract, treating the old principle of "no contract, no work" as a dead letter. This was despite the fact that The New School administration repeatedly made it clear that it had no intention of accepting the demands put forward by the student workers. In February, UAW Local 7902 filed its third Unfair Labor Practice charge against The New School since August 2023, accusing the university of "bad faith bargaining."

The UAW leadership kept these workers on the job as long as possible, anxious that a prolonged strike could galvanize opposition among workers more broadly. The union apparatus is particularly concerned to suppress any struggles that could threaten to come into conflict with the Democratic Party in the run-up to the US elections in November.

The UAW bureaucracy only allowed New School workers on the picket

line after it became clear they could not hold them back any longer, while using the short strike as a prelude to the announcement of a "groundbreaking" deal it had already worked out behind closed doors with the university administration.

The UAW bureaucracy has proven time and again that it stands on the opposite side of the barricades. Over the last four years, at New York University, Columbia University and The New School, graduate student workers and adjunct/part-time faculty have either been kept from striking all together or seen their strikes isolated and sabotaged by the UAW.

Now, in the context of an escalating global war and a deepening political crisis in the United States, the trade union bureaucracy is moving into overdrive to suppress the class struggle and corral workers and young people back into the arms of the Democratic Party, one of the two ruling class parties of Wall Street and imperialist war.

Jerry White, candidate for the Socialist Equality Party in the 2022 US presidential elections, wrote in a tweet Monday, "I urge The New School academic workers to reject the sellout contract pushed by UAW President Shawn Fain, Region 9A Director and DSA member Brandon Mancilla and the rest of the UAW bureaucracy—who are nothing but Genocide Joe Biden's campaign frontmen."

The essential role of the trade union bureaucracy as a labor police force for the ruling class was demonstrated most blatantly the day before the strike at The New School was shut down, when President Joe Biden called out UAW President Shawn Fain in his State of the Union address as "a great friend, and a great labor leader." Fain and the UAW Executive Board have endorsed "Genocide Joe" and worked closely with the Biden administration last year to smother the opposition of autoworkers. Fain has made repeated references to the need for the unions to be involved in the "arsenal of democracy," in other words, the subordination of the working class to wartime production.

There is significant opposition among student workers to the war aims of American imperialism. On the first day of the strike, March 6, dozens of pro-Palestine students and faculty members from The New School staged a demonstration on campus in response to a scheduled lecture by an Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) soldier involved in the genocide in Gaza. Around 60 academic workers picketing in front of The New School shifted over to the event location and joined the protesters.

The fight for better living and working conditions, against attacks on democratic rights and against genocide and war are inherently linked and require a break with the two bourgeois parties and their police officers in the trade union bureaucracy.

Student workers must also reject the pseudo-left appendages of the Democratic Party, namely the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). The DSA has promoted every sellout contract and strike suppression over the last four years, presenting each rotten pro-company/university contract as "historic." Among academic workers, the DSA has been centrally involved in cobbling together these agreements, keeping workers on the job and quickly shutting down the strikes that managed to erupt. Now, after backing Fain in the UAW presidential elections, DSA members hold leading positions in the bureaucracy, attempting to provide the hated apparatus with a "left" face.

New School workers are in a direct fight against the Democratic Party, which controls New York City politics and the powerful corporate and financial interests they speak for. The board of trustees of The New School is a rogues' gallery of corporate and financial parasites and Democratic Party operatives. Moreover, the dispatch of the National Guard to city subways and the Democrats' adoption of the Republicans' law-and-order policies has further demonstrated the right-wing character of the Democratic Party, one of the oldest capitalist parties in the world.

The struggle by academic student workers must be based on a turn to the working class more broadly in New York, the US and internationally, which is beginning to move against attacks on wages, jobs and working

conditions. The turn towards the working class should be guided by a socialist program to fight imperialist war, genocide, and fascist dictatorship.



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