Columbia University attacks graduate student workers' right to organize

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Today, as the fall semester begins at Columbia University in New York City, nearly 140 graduate student instructors at Columbia will not teach classes as a part of a calculated anti-worker strategy by the administration. While the university will still pay the student workers, it has hired adjuncts to cover their teaching duties.

Federal labor law requires the university to maintain existing wages and benefits during contract negotiations. By paying graduate workers but hiring adjuncts to replace them, Columbia avoids a clear lockout charge while weakening workers' position at the bargaining table and seeks to intimidate student workers and all other faculty and staff.

The graduate students received word of their removal from teaching positions just weeks ago amid allegations by the university that the graduate student workers union, the Student Workers of Columbia, United Auto Workers Local 2710 (SWC-UAW), "is not bargaining in good faith, in violation of the National Labor Relations Act."

The student workers' current contract with Columbia expired on June 30. On July 10, the university offered a one-year contract extension with an insulting 2 percent raise—a pay cut when adjusting for inflation. Columbia filed an Unfair Labor Practice charge against the SWC-UAW with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) on August 8.

In the charge, Columbia complains that the SWC-UAW is "conditioning bargaining on the presence of an expelled student," Grant Miner, the president of the union, who was expelled for his participation in the pro-Palestinian occupation of Hamilton Hall in April 2024.

Columbia alleges that the SWC-UAW is "improperly attempting to bargain" over demands "that the University strip Public Safety Special Patrol Officers of the authority to make arrests… and that the University designate the campus as a sanctuary space." It claims that the union violated the no-strike clause in the current contract by directing its members to join the pro-Palestinian occupation of Butler Library in May.

Columbia concludes that "the Union has ceased functioning as a labor organization" because it has "no intention of bargaining primarily over the terms and conditions of employment for student workers." In a footnote, Columbia suggests that the NLRB's 2016 decision to allow Columbia student workers to unionize was a mistake, citing a 1973 ruling by the Supreme Court that "principles developed for use in an industrial setting cannot be imposed blindly on the academic world."

The SWC-UAW leadership, for its part, has downplayed the significance of the Unfair Labor Practice charge. In a statement on Instagram, it wrote that the charge "is very unlikely to result in decertification," suggesting that it is merely intended to "stoke fear" and sway the "wider public." The union has denied that it directed students to occupy Butler Library and has not defended student workers' right to strike even as their jobs are taken by scabs.

Students, staff and faculty must recognize what is really happening: Columbia has launched a serious attack on the basic democratic right to organize. What emerges is a picture of a university administration that, having capitulated in the face of Trump's assault on academic freedom, cannot tolerate any semblance of workers' organization on campus.

The July 23 deal between the university and the Trump administration has set the stage for the coming academic year. After suspending nearly 80 students for participating in the occupation of Butler Library, Columbia agreed to pay $200 million to the federal government and $21 million to supposed victims of "antisemitism" on campus to obtain restoration of $400 million in federal research funding illegally frozen by the White House.

The deal committed Columbia to increase its cooperation with law enforcement, ban masks at protests, remove all students from its disciplinary panel, adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism—institutionalizing the grotesque lie that criticism of Zionism and the Israeli state is equivalent to antisemitism—and appoint a new senior vice provost to supervise Middle Eastern, South Asian and African studies.

The university pledged to take steps to "decrease financial dependence on international student enrollment," develop

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materials to indoctrinate students and, effectively, to discriminate against international student applicants based on their political views. Other provisions are designed give the Trump administration further means to make demands regarding course content, admissions and hiring.

All of this will take place amid Trump's military-police occupation of Washington, D.C. and his plans to occupy major American cities using the National Guard in a push toward presidential dictatorship. As the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) wrote in a recent statement, "The military occupation of Washington is part of an unfolding presidential coup that continues and deepens the January 6, 2021 insurrection, but this time executed with the full apparatus of the capitalist state."

Trump intends to use the deal at Columbia as a template to bring other universities throughout the country to heel. As the WSWS wrote in March, "Trump is implementing an American version of *Gleichschaltung*—the Nazis' 'synchronization' of all elements of intellectual and cultural life, including the revision of university programs and the purging of scholars, to correspond with state ideology."

Student workers have every right to fight for their jobs and a living wage; every right to organize in defense of academic freedom, democratic rights and the rights of international students; and every right to organize against fascism and genocide, which pose existential threats to the working class.

But student workers cannot fight inequality, authoritarianism and war within the straitjacket imposed by the United Auto Workers (UAW) bureaucracy. While working with the UAW apparatus may serve the careerist aspirations of budding trade-union bureaucrats, it has proven a complete disaster for rank-and-file student workers.

In 2021, during a three-week strike in the spring semester, rank-and-file student workers exploded in opposition over the union leadership's efforts to impose a contract that did not meet the their demands. The UAW bureaucracy sought to isolate Columbia student workers and fought tooth and nail to prevent the Columbia strike from taking place at the same time as a student worker strike at New York University.

The SWC-UAW leadership made a show of reforming itself. After a ten-week strike in the fall semester with minimal strike pay, student workers ultimately voted to approve a contract that failed to meet their demands. The union leadership hailed the contract as a "historic victory."

The inclusion of a no-strike clause was among the WSWS's central criticisms of the contract in 2022. In 2025, the SWC-UAW's adherence to the no-strike clause amounts to an effort to disarm the membership in the face of ruthless attacks on their jobs, the suspension and expulsion of their members by the university and even the detention of UAW members, such as Columbia graduates Mahmoud Khalil and Mohsen Mahdawi, by Trump's immigration enforcement apparatus.

As the WSWS wrote in its Labor Day statement, "What are called 'unions' today bear no resemblance to the organizations that once fought to defend workers' interests. They function instead as appendages of the corporations, a labor police force that blocks struggle rather than organizes it. UAW President Shawn Fain has openly aligned himself with Trump's tariffs, while many other union leaders have rallied behind Trump, embracing the nationalist poison designed to divide the international working class."

In 2022, graduate student workers formed an important base of support for Mack Trucks worker and socialist Will Lehman, who ran for president of the UAW on the platform of abolishing the UAW bureaucracy and transferring control of the billion-dollar assets of the UAW to rank-and-file committees on the shop floor.

Today, this program takes on a new urgency. To defend and extend their right to organize, student workers must form rank-and-file committees connected with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). They must unite with workers across New York City and throughout the world in a revolutionary struggle against the source of authoritarianism and war, the capitalist system.

This is not a utopian vision. This is a necessity. Workers cannot and will not stand by while the world descends into barbarism. Masses of workers are on a collision course with the powers that be. But the working class cannot resolve the crisis of capitalism spontaneously; for that, it needs a revolutionary leadership, trained in the methods and historical experience of Marxism.

This is the leadership that the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) are fighting to build. If you agree with this perspective, join our movement.

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