

# New York University contract faculty threaten strike action to win first contract

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New York University's contract faculty are currently voting on authorizing strike action after 15 months of stonewalled negotiations by NYU administration. The roughly 950 full-time non-tenure track professors are organized under the Contract Faculty United-United Auto Workers (CFU-UAW) union and are fighting for their first contract. They are demanding protections to academic freedom, better pay and improved job security, healthcare and benefits.

Contract faculty—who unionized in February 2024—make up half of NYU's full-time faculty. Universities systematically prey and rely on lower-paid contract faculty who receive fewer benefits and low job security compared to their tenured counterparts. These precarious conditions force many into increased teaching loads, larger class sizes, or unwanted curricular changes.

The current strike authorization vote, which goes from February 9 to 20, comes after more than a year of bargaining where NYU administration has rejected key demands, according to the union.

On compensation, contract faculty are calling for corrections to longstanding inequities between contract and tenured faculty, and which reflect the actual cost of living in New York City. They are also demanding transparent, enforceable processes for reappointment and promotion, as well as participation in shared governance at the school, program and department level. Without such protections, contract faculty remain vulnerable to non-renewal or retaliation for their teaching or research, especially in an environment where political attacks on higher education and academic speech are escalating nationally.

In response to the strike authorization vote, NYU President Linda Mills emailed the entire faculty denouncing the action as "unjustifiable to take an action so potentially disruptive to our students" and calling for mediation. Contract mediation is a tried and tested tactic utilized by both employers and unions to ram through concessionary agreements through a "third-party" mediator. Mills stated that the university has offered a measly 3 percent raise annually over a five-year contract and described the union's demand for a 5 percent annual raise as "exorbitant."

In a statement to *Washington Square News*, a NYU spokesperson said, "At a time of real financial uncertainty

across higher education, NYU has made generous proposals that would place NYU's unionized contract faculty at or near the top of what unionized contract faculty are paid at other institutions. Both sides owe it to NYU's students—and to the faculty themselves—to try mediation now and work toward a fair agreement without unnecessary disruption."

The burden of "financial uncertainty" invoked by the administration is not borne by the university's leadership or its balance sheets, but by underpaid academic workers struggling to survive in one of the most expensive cities in the world. NYU is not an institution on the brink: It controls a \$6.5 billion endowment and roughly \$15 billion in real estate assets, making it one of New York City's largest private property owners.

A resounding "yes" strike vote is essential to demonstrate the determination of the 950 education workers to fight for livable wages and dignified conditions, but the conduct of this struggle cannot be left in the hands of the UAW bureaucracy, which has repeatedly sought to contain and shut down strikes before workers' demands are met.

CFU-UAW is part of UAW Local 7902, which also represents adjuncts and other academic workers at NYU and the New School. In 2024, the union shut down a strike by graduate and undergraduate academic student workers at The New School, who were working under an expired contract, after only three days, without a vote by workers and without releasing the full details of what turned out to be a wholly inadequate contract.

The UAW apparatus itself—hated among autoworkers for its role in severely deteriorated working conditions—sits atop a whopping \$1.1 billion in assets. But this significant amount of resources drawn from workers' dues money funds not militant workers' struggles, but the six-figure paychecks of a privileged managerial layer of union executives who systematically suppress and isolate workers' struggles while collaborating with corporate management and government officials.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* recently wrote:

Historically, socialists and rank-and-file militants viewed the automatic dues checkoff with deep suspicion

because it strengthened the bureaucracy's independence from the workers it claims to represent. The employer deducts dues from workers' paychecks and remits them automatically, insulating the apparatus from the active, democratic consent of the rank and file and tying the union institutionally to management as the dues collector.

The checkoff was massively expanded during World War II as part of a broader corporatist bargain. The unions, including the UAW, enforced the wartime no-strike pledge and participated in joint production arrangements aimed at suppressing wages and increasing output, while employers guaranteed the uninterrupted flow of dues. This helped facilitate the consolidation of a pro-capitalist union bureaucracy.

The UAW is one of the most notoriously corrupt and hated union bureaucracies. It is significant that on the CFU's website under the FAQ section, the following question is posed: "I heard national UAW leaders were convicted of corruption. Why should we partner with a corrupt organization?"

After briefly explaining the widespread corruption of top UAW officials, CFU responds, "We are proud that the local we are joining helped lead charges to remove former President Gary Jones from the UAW and implement ethics reforms to ensure this never happens again... Since news of corruption broke in 2019, rank-and-file UAW members like our adjunct and grad colleagues have successfully organized for democratic reforms and more than 20,000 academic workers across the country have made the decision to join the UAW. In 2021, UAW members voted overwhelmingly to move to a system of direct elections for leadership, and in 2022, members in our region elected reformer and academic worker Brandon Mancilla of Harvard's HGSU-UAW to be our representative on the International Executive Board."

However, "ethics reforms" and the election of so-called "reformers" has done nothing to change the anti-worker role of the UAW. The direct UAW leadership elections in 2022 were conducted amid widespread vote suppression by the UAW bureaucracy, leading to a historic low of just 9 percent participation.

Shawn Fain was elected promising reform, but the 2023 "stand-up" strike of the Big Three auto manufacturers left most workers isolated and on the job and resulted in concessionary contracts which have led to significant layoffs and plant closures. Fain has openly hailed Trump's economic nationalism and trade war tariffs, while Fain's administration has been enmeshed in corruption and factional crisis.

Any attempts at minor reforms have not and will not change the material basis of the UAW bureaucracy. The question for workers is not whether a bureaucrat is personally less corrupt, but who controls the union's power and money: the

membership or a salaried caste.

This is exactly the question at the heart of Mack Truck worker Will Lehman's 2026 campaign for UAW president:

First, "To end the dictatorship of the Solidarity House bureaucracy over the union, purge the UAW of hundreds of parasitic union bureaucrats, promote the creation of a network of rank-and-file committees, and transfer power and decision making from the pro-corporate union apparatus to workers on the shop floor."

Second, ending the collaboration of the UAW with the corporations. "Forty-five years of pro-corporate policies must be replaced with a strategy of class struggle," Lehman stated. His program calls for wages that fully recover losses caused by past concessions and inflation, a zero-layoff policy, health insurance at the company's expense, and the historic demand for a 30-hour week with no loss of pay.

Third, Lehman calls for repudiating the chauvinism and nationalism of the UAW bureaucracy. "Workers have nothing to gain from a trade war, which amounts to a struggle among capitalists for control of markets and a greater share of profits gained through the exploitation of the working class," he declared. "What we need is an international strategy based on the unified struggle of American, Canadian and Mexican workers against transnational corporations."

Fourth, Lehman calls for mobilizing the industrial power of the union membership to defend democratic rights and oppose war.

The fight at NYU will not be won by appeals to the conscience of the administration, nor by reliance on the union leadership. It requires the conscious mobilization of rank-and-file contract faculty, together with adjuncts, graduate workers, staff and students, in a unified movement against the corporate transformation of the university. This means forming independent rank-and-file committees that link up with academic workers at other campuses in New York City and beyond.

All those interested in this perspective should become active in Lehman's campaign.



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