

UAW threatens to block strike by student workers at Columbia University

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Student workers at Columbia University in New York City voted by 91.5 percent last week to authorize a strike in pursuit of their second contract with the university. Their first contract expired in July of 2025.

The 1,129 “yes” to 105 “no” vote is a powerful declaration by graduate and undergraduate workers that they will not accept poverty wages, precarious employment and the destruction of democratic rights on a campus that has become a testing ground for authoritarian policies.

Their union, Student Workers of Columbia (SWC), is an affiliate of the United Auto Workers (UAW). At the same time, 950 contract faculty members at New York University, also covered by the UAW, are poised to strike March 23 for their first contract amid stonewalling by NYU.

At the time of the strike authorization vote, the SWC was demanding a living wage and a cost-of-living escalator clause for PhD workers and hourly workers alike in one of the most expensive cities in the world. It was also demanding stronger protections for non-citizen student workers, expanded healthcare benefits, expansion of childcare subsidies, anti-discrimination and anti-harassment protections, protections against unjust discipline and firings, protections against AI, job security and union rights.

The SWC linked economic demands to the assault on democratic rights on campus. The workers were demanding “cops off campus,” making Columbia a “sanctuary campus,” stopping surveillance on campus, fairer disciplinary processes and the defense of academic freedom, including the right to protest without fear of expulsion, arrest or deportation. They also connected the contract fight to demands that Columbia divest from weapons manufacturers and institutions connected to the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza, as well as companies or governments that violated international law.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) fully supports these demands. Multiple SWC members have been targets of attack on campus by Columbia and federal police working with the Columbia administration. These include Mahmoud Khalil, who was arrested and detained for months by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) for his participation in pro-Palestinian protests; Mohsen Mahdawi, who was detained by ICE last April when he appeared for a

naturalization interview; and SWC President Grant Miner, who was expelled for taking part in a pro-Palestinian protest.

The UAW bureaucracy has threatened to withhold authorization of a strike unless the SWC waters down its demands, which were approved by the SWC membership. On March 14, *The Free Press*, a right-wing outlet founded by Zionist Bari Weiss, published a hit piece denouncing the student workers’ demands and hailing the intervention of the UAW Region 9A leadership.

Emails and chats by SWC members published by the article’s author speak for themselves on the anti-worker role of the UAW apparatus. Several chats reference comments made by Region 9A Servicing Representative Courtney Bither, who made \$133,000 in 2024. One said Bither “won’t support our articles in their current form,” and “raised the specter that SWC could be put into ‘receivership’ by UAW if we do not correct course.”

In a screenshot of Bither’s notes to the SWC, she says, “Part of getting a strike authorized is showing substantive bargaining process. Part of that means it can’t be all of your initial proposals still on the table... Based on bargaining right now it seems that it’s unlikely that IEB will approve of a strike.”

In response to these threats, SWC President Grant Miner emailed the membership, stating:

Our regional director, Brandon [Mancilla], is the one who writes a letter to the IEB to recommend a strike. Courtney meets regularly with Brandon to update him on the substantive issues we are bargaining over and the status of our issues. I want people to understand in no uncertain terms that the region has communicated to us that if we do not alter our proposals to narrow their scope and permissiveness, our strike will not be approved. The changes we made to our articles were in response to feedback solicited with a singular question: “What do we have to change in order to be able to honor our workers’ desire for a strike?”

In other words, the national UAW bureaucracy has threatened

to block a democratically authorized strike if the SWC refuses to capitulate to its demands. This is being done under the auspices of Region 9A Director Brandon Mancilla, who is a Democratic Socialist of America (DSA) member, elevated by UAW President Shawn Fain, and under the DSA-Democratic mayor, Zohran Mamdani.

Changes were subsequently made to the SWC's demands under UAW pressure, including dropping the demands to end all surveillance and to remove police from the campus. These garnered comments such as: "This is clearly against the democratic spirit of this union."

The Free Press celebrated this intervention as the voice of "hard-nosed" experience, presenting the UAW bureaucracy as a responsible partner of the university administration and the government. "Serious" unions, according to *The Free Press*, the UAW and the DSA, must limit themselves to narrow, purely economic questions and suppress any and all political demands or opposition.

This is entirely in line with the role the UAW apparatus has played for decades. Across the auto industry, the UAW leadership has integrated itself into corporate management and the capitalist state, trading away wages, conditions and democratic rights in exchange for dues income and positions for the bureaucracy. At universities, the same apparatus seeks to keep struggles isolated campus by campus, impose concessions and block any movement that threatens to challenge both big business parties.

This apparatus fears above all that workers will link up across workplaces and connect their fight for decent conditions to the growing opposition to war, dictatorship and social inequality.

The UAW bureaucracy—including the DSA, which is part of the Fain regime—tells Columbia student workers to get in line and threatens receivership at a time when Columbia's campus has been ground zero for the Trump administration's repression and attacks on academic freedom, to which the Columbia administration has capitulated. The bureaucracy is intervening not only as a corrupt apparatus, but as an extension of the state.

Last year, following mass Gaza solidarity protests, the Trump administration weaponized funding and regulatory mechanisms against Columbia, demanding sweeping changes in policy under the pretext of combating "antisemitism." Trump froze roughly \$400 million in federal research grants and made clear that future funding—some \$1.3 billion in 2024 alone—would be tied to the university's willingness to discipline protesters, censor opposition to the Gaza genocide and restructure curricula in line with the needs of US imperialism.

Columbia's leadership, rooted in the Democratic Party and corporate media elites, responded by collaborating with this offensive. Columbia entered into a settlement with Trump, agreeing to pay more than \$220 million and impose far-reaching changes in admissions, programming and campus discipline. The deal codified bans on masks at protests,

tightened disciplinary procedures, expanded cooperation with the New York Police Department and pledged to create new administrative structures to monitor alleged "antisemitism"—a euphemism for silencing anti-genocide activism. The university also committed to share more data on international students with the Department of Homeland Security and to inform federal authorities whenever such students were arrested, explicitly tying immigration status to political repression.

The SWC's first contract failed to provide a living wage, something admitted openly by SWC leaders. It included a no-strike clause, of which the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote: this "means that the new contract at Columbia will tie students' hands in the future under conditions in which millions of workers are being radicalized and driven into struggle."

Today, student workers confront a qualitatively more advanced political situation. Trump is moving to establish dictatorship at home while waging imperialist war abroad. Student workers were and are still up against two hostile forces: the Columbia administration, run by the ultra-wealthy with deep ties to Wall Street, the Democratic Party and the military-industrial complex, and the UAW bureaucracy, which repeats Columbia's lies that demands for adequate living and working conditions are not feasible.

The way forward for student workers at Columbia and more broadly begins with a break from the UAW bureaucracy and the building of a rank-and-file committee independent of the union bureaucracy. If workers defy the UAW apparatus, this will find wide support from tens of thousands of graduate students in the UAW and from autoworkers, and encourage them to do the same.

This is the basis of socialist autoworker Will Lehman's campaign for president of the UAW. Lehman's platform seeks not to reform, but to abolish the UAW bureaucracy and transfer power to the rank-and-file—taking the vast resources of the union out of the bureaucracy's hands and placing them under the democratic control of rank-and-file workers. His campaign is based on ending corporate collaboration, establishing the international unity of the working class, and defending the democratic rights of immigrants and all workers.



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