

# After 2 votes in favor, UAW bureaucracy denies strike approval to student workers at Columbia University

Tim Avery  
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On Tuesday, the Student Workers of Columbia-United Auto Workers (SWC-UAW), which covers over 3,000 student workers at Columbia University in New York City, announced that the UAW leadership rejected its request for strike approval.

The SWC membership had voted by 91.5 percent to authorize a strike last month, 1,129 to 105. They voted 82.2 percent in favor of starting the strike on April 23. Over a hundred members wrote letters urging Region 9A Director Brandon Mancilla and UAW President Shawn Fain to authorize their strike.

In an email to the membership, the SWC wrote, “This does not mean we cannot strike this semester, but it does mean that we would not get strike pay from the UAW should we go on strike to win some or all of our demands.”

The UAW bureaucracy has twice now rejected their democratic vote. Students must organize to impose their decision, with or without the approval of corrupt and unaccountable bureaucrats! Columbia students should form independent rank-and-file strike committees to prepare a struggle themselves and to demand full strike pay, which are paid out of their own dues money.

Columbia student workers should appeal to the working class throughout New York City and beyond for support and solidarity. Graduate workers at Harvard University, also organized in the UAW, have already set a strike deadline of April 21.

Will Lehman, a rank-and-file autoworker and candidate for UAW president, responded to the UAW’s decision by declaring: “Your fight against intolerable learning, living and working conditions at Columbia University, which the Trump administration has made a central target of its efforts to establish a presidential dictatorship in the United States, will resonate powerfully with workers

across the globe. Power must be seized from the bureaucracy and placed in the hands of the rank and file so that we can fight for a politically conscious movement of workers together.”

Throughout the semester, UAW leadership has acted as an arm of management at Columbia University. Columbia, having utterly capitulated before the Trump White House’s assault on academic freedom, argued in September that the SWC should be decertified for its insistence on “political” as opposed to purely economic demands.

Last month, news broke that UAW officials intervened in support of this argument. UAW Region 9A—directed by Mancilla, a Democratic Socialist of America (DSA) member—ordered SWC to water down its demands for “cops off campus,” protections from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), an end to campus surveillance, fairer disciplinary processes, and divestment from weapons manufacturers and institutions complicit in the US-backed genocide in Gaza.

And still, the UAW leadership is not satisfied! Now, it “has rejected our request for strike approval with a recommendation to delay it until it appears that the University will not concede further without a strike,” according to SWC leadership. What this really means is to run out the clock until the end of the semester, while students lose leverage and are more easily pressured to make even more concessions.

Student workers should reject with contempt the argument that their demands are “too political.” The prospect of a political strike terrifies management at Columbia, because it would pose a serious challenge to the status quo: The Trump-Columbia partnership, Columbia’s collaboration with US imperialism, and the staggering disparity between the multi-billion-dollar

assets of the university and the paltry wages and benefits it gives student workers in one of the most expensive cities in the world.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote: “The union bureaucracy, bound by a thousand threads to the political establishment, primarily through the Democrats, functions as the corporate oligarchy’s industrial police force... The more powerful the potential for a mass movement, the more openly and shamelessly the union bureaucracy attempts to disrupt it.”

In Michigan, UAW leadership has kept 1,300 Nexteer Automotive workers on the job for nearly two weeks after workers rejected a sellout contract by 96.2 percent. When workers asked why a strike had not been called, UAW officials said it was “illegal” to walk out under the terms of the contract.

At the University of California, UAW leadership kept 40,000 academic workers on the job for nearly three weeks without a contract after 93.3 percent of workers voted to strike. It refused to set a strike date and ultimately rammed through a contract without a fight.

At Columbia, the UAW bureaucracy committed student workers to a no-strike clause in their first contract. Student workers at Columbia have now been working without a contract since June 30, 2025.

It is high time to revive the old union slogan, “No contract, no work!” But this cannot happen without confronting the union bureaucracy, a parasitic layer full of figures like Mancilla and Fain who siphon six-figure salaries off workers’ dues while doing everything in their power to demobilize the fighting strength of the working class.

Meanwhile, the SWC leadership is seeking to silence public dissent and prevent an open rebellion against the bureaucratic apparatus. In a recent email, local officials wrote, “A coordinated media strategy ensures that our messaging is effective and protects us from bad-faith publications.”

In a recent article in the *Columbia Daily Spectator*, SWC president Grant Miner remarked nervously about “undue scrutiny from parties which are not a part of our community and not a part of our bargaining... people from outside of the University who don’t have, frankly, the best interest of either the union or the University at heart.”

The UAW’s denunciation of unstated “outside parties,” long used as part of a red-baiting strategy to cut workers off from socialist militants, reflects the extreme nervousness about their ability to keep a lid on the situation and enforce the UAW’s no-strike dictate.

Fain and the rest of the UAW apparatus fear that the Trump Administration could use a strike as the impetus to reverse a 2016 National Labor Relations Board ruling that gave governmental sanction to student workers unions, thereby jeopardizing their dues base. They are also fearful that a movement of student workers, opposing not only poverty-level wages but also the fascistic assault on immigrants and genocidal wars, can serve as a nucleus for a broader offensive of the working class far beyond what the union bureaucracy can control.

In New York City, 34,000 building workers are poised to strike next week. Next month, the contract expires for 40,000 transit workers, raising the prospects for a strike that could cripple the city.

All this is happening as Trump is openly threatening genocide against Iran, a country of 90 million people, using language like “a whole civilization will die tonight.” A ground invasion, a resumption of the draft, and the use of nuclear weapons against Iran are all very real possibilities. Basic living conditions for workers will only deteriorate as all aspects of life are subordinated to war.

The working class is the only social force with the potential to bring down the Trump administration, stop the war against Iran, and end social inequality, but it cannot do so without breaking free of the shackles imposed by the union bureaucracy and building independent organizations controlled directly by the rank and file. Columbia student workers: Do not let the UAW bureaucracy sabotage your struggle. Seize the initiative, build rank-and-file committees and get involved with the International Youth and Students for Social Equality today.



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