

Columbia University graduate student union drops demand for divestment from pro-genocide companies

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At a bargaining session with Columbia University administration last Tuesday, the leadership of Student Workers of Columbia (SWC), the United Auto Workers (UAW)-affiliated union with over 3,000 graduate and undergraduate student workers, dropped its long-standing demand that the university administration divest from companies and institutions tied to the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza. The abandonment of the divestment demand marks the latest stage in a sustained campaign by the UAW bureaucracy to strip the contract fight at Columbia of any political content that challenges the university administration and the capitalist state.

SWC-UAW has been in contract talks with the University since March of last year. The contract between the union and Columbia University expired in June of 2025. Student workers have run up against a brick wall as the university administration has refused many demands related to workplace issues and the union leadership has suppressed workers' efforts to strike for their demands.

Revealing more about the strategy of the union leadership than intended, Frankie Tavares, a doctoral student and member of the SWC-UAW bargaining committee, told the *Columbia Spectator*, "A lot of what has been happening at the table has been us dropping some articles, moving closer to the University, holding strong on certain demands, but ultimately moving forward in our contract campaign towards a set of demands that are narrower." Also speaking with the *Spectator*, SWC-UAW President Grant Miner stated, in response to dropping the divestment demand, "You start off a campaign with one thing, and then as you bargain, you have to face the realities of where you are."

The divestment demand was not a minor issue in the struggle of student workers. It had been one of the most politically significant planks in the contract platform overwhelmingly endorsed by the SWC membership, and a demand of Columbia student groups since 2016. Students have demanded that Columbia withdraw its \$13.6 billion endowment from weapons manufacturers, military contractors and other entities complicit in Israel's genocide of the population of Gaza, as well as from

companies and governments violating international law through their arming and funding of the genocide.

The dropping of the divestment demand follows months of direct intervention by the UAW bureaucracy to sabotage the struggle of Columbia student workers. In March, after SWC members voted by 91.5 percent—1,129 to 105—to authorize a strike, UAW Region 9A leadership, directed by Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) member Brandon Mancilla, refused to approve the walkout unless students' political demands related to the defense of democratic rights, campus policing and divestment were substantially narrowed. Union Servicing Representative Courtney Bither, who made over \$140,000 last year, informed the SWC that the UAW International Executive Board was unlikely to authorize a strike, 'if it's all of your initial proposals still on the table.' SWC was threatened with being placed under receivership and subsequently removed demands to end campus surveillance and get police off campus. Now the divestment demand has been scrapped.

Demands by the SWC for divestment from companies and governments that supported Israel began after the start of the Gaza genocide in October of 2023. Columbia University has been a center of the massive international protest movement that erupted in response to the Israeli onslaught. Graduate and undergraduate students organized and participated in hundreds of protests on and off campus, including the large encampment protest in the center of Columbia's Morningside Heights campus in Manhattan. These students faced vicious police repression, many suffering serious injuries from riot police attacks overseen by the Democratic Party administration of Mayor Eric Adams.

The actions of the UAW bureaucracy expose the bogus claims by UAW President Shawn Fain and his defenders in the DSA and other pseudo-left groups that the criminal investigation into his abuse of power and retaliation against internal rivals is the result of a political witch-hunt for the UAW's supposedly "anti-war stance on Gaza."

As Will Lehman, the Mack Trucks worker and socialist candidate for UAW president, pointed out at the July 30 debate

with other presidential candidates, Fain backed “Genocide Joe” Biden, sat by as anti-genocide protesters were dragged out a UAW convention that endorsed Biden, and sabotaged the struggles of Columbia, University of California and other academic workers fighting the repression of protesters, along with workers in strategic defense industries that supply Israel with weapons.

“After organizing some of these higher education sites, the UAW sells them out. Whether it is University of California, Columbia, Harvard, the UAW repeatedly brings back agreements that aren’t what the members want. It has even told workers they can’t strike over political demands. What type of workers organization bars workers who are paying dues to it from striking over things they find they need to fight for? This all gets swept underneath the rug so someone can make \$200,000 a year as an organizer.”

Students at Columbia must draw the critical political lessons of the last three years and beyond. A fight against genocide, war and dictatorship, and for basic democratic, social and economic rights demands the development of a mass movement of the working class independent of the corporatist trade union apparatus and all capitalist political parties. It requires the building of independent rank-and-file committees as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) and, most importantly, the building of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) and the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in the fight for socialism.

The present intervention of the UAW bureaucracy is the continuation of a well-established pattern. During the 2021 strikes at Columbia, the UAW apparatus worked to isolate student workers and impose a contract that failed to meet workers’ basic demands. When rank-and-file workers voted down the first sellout proposal, the bureaucracy regrouped and rammed through a modified version months later. The contract ultimately ratified in early 2022 included a no-strike clause that the *World Socialist Web Site* warned would ‘tie students’ hands in the future under conditions in which millions of workers are being radicalized and driven into struggle.’

That warning has been vindicated. The no-strike clause has been used to disarm the membership as student anti-genocide protesters were suspended, expelled, and—in the cases of SWC members Mahmoud Khalil and Mohsen Mahdawi—detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

As in the automotive plants and other industrial sectors, the UAW bureaucracy works on behalf of capitalism. At the universities, that means subservience to the administrations that run the institutions. The Columbia administration--tied to Wall Street, the military-intelligence apparatus and both the Democratic and Republican parties--is an instrument of the corporate-financial oligarchy and cannot be appealed to for reforms. It has collaborated fully with the Trump administration’s efforts to implement an American version of Gleichschaltung—the Nazis’ ‘synchronization’ of intellectual and

cultural life to state ideology.

The UAW apparatus functions not as a defender of workers but as a pillar of class rule. UAW President Shawn Fain operated as a de facto member of the Biden White House and today supports Trump’s trade war measures. At Harvard, the UAW shut down a 40-day strike by 4,000 graduate workers in June without a contract. At the University of California, 48,000 academic workers were kept on the job for weeks despite a 93.3 percent strike authorization vote before a sellout was rammed through. Presently, the UAW bureaucracy is isolating hundreds of striking public defenders in New York City and Detroit.

The way forward for student workers begins with a break from the UAW bureaucracy and the building of rank-and-file committees independent of the apparatus. This is the basis of socialist autoworker Will Lehman’s campaign for president of the UAW. Lehman does not seek to reform the union bureaucracy but to abolish it, transferring the union’s vast resources to the democratic control of rank-and-file workers. In a March statement, Lehman denounced the UAW’s intervention at Columbia as ‘the machinery of the union acting as management’s enforcer’ and called the suppressed demands ‘minimal requirements for decent work and basic rights.’ Lehman urged workers to form independent rank-and-file committees and connect internationally through the IWA-RFC.

Most importantly, students at Columbia must build a chapter of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE)—the youth and student movement of the Trotskyist, socialist movement. Three years of protest against genocide, war and dictatorship have produced nothing except the escalation of attacks on democratic rights at home and imperialist war abroad. This is because the political perspective and program of the movement was one of appeals to the capitalists. On campus, the IYSSE will work to draw the necessary political conclusions of the struggles of workers and youth, provide a socialist program of struggle and politically lead the developing opposition on campus against dictatorship and war.



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