

Columbia University postdoctoral workers vote overwhelmingly to authorize strike

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Some 1,000 postdoctoral researchers, associate research scientists and associate research scholars at Columbia University have voted by over 90 percent to authorize strike action, the Columbia Postdoctoral Workers-United Auto Workers (CPW-UAW) Local 4100 announced last weekend. Approximately 850 workers participated in the vote, a record turnout, which comes after six months of negotiations failed to produce a contract.

The postdocs are demanding an \$80,000 salary minimum, year-long appointments to replace precarious three- and six-month posts, and increased university contributions to childcare costs. The vast majority of the bargaining unit is composed of international workers, for whom the stakes extend beyond wages to the question of whether they can remain in the country under the Trump administration's purge of international students and political opponents.

One week after the strike vote, the union leadership has not announced a strike date. The UAW bureaucracy under President Shawn Fain and Region 9A Director Brandon Mancilla, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), have repeatedly defied the will of Columbia University members and sought to curtail their political demands, including opposition to Columbia University's complicity with the Israeli state and the bipartisan suppression of anti-genocide protests.

A serious struggle for their demands requires that postdocs break from the stranglehold of the UAW union bureaucracy and build independent rank-and-file committees, part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), uniting postdocs with graduate and undergraduate student workers, faculty, staff and the working class more broadly.

"We've been bargaining now with Columbia for several months, and this comes after a year of instability that our workers have experienced due to chaos at the federal level," Andrew Little, president of Local 4100, told the *Chief Leader*.

Anna Yoney, an associate research scientist, told the *Chief Leader*, "We want to do the research that brought us to Columbia and that contributes to the University's mission. But our work deserves to be respected, and our working conditions need to be sustainable. This vote sends a clear message: we are united and we are prepared to strike if necessary to win a fair contract."

The postdocs' determination is entirely justified. Columbia University sits atop a \$13 billion endowment and billions more in New York City real estate. Its Board of Trustees is populated by hedge fund billionaires with deep ties to Wall Street and the military-industrial complex. Meanwhile, postdoctoral researchers in one of the most expensive cities in the world survive on salaries well below a decent standard of living.

A report by the Fund for the City of New York calculated that a household income of \$100,000 is the minimum for an adequate existence; average rent for a one-bedroom apartment in Manhattan approaches \$4,000 per month. The university's demand that highly skilled workers—who generate the research underpinning Columbia's prestige and its hundreds of millions of dollars in federal grants—accept poverty wages

and three-month appointments that make it impossible to sign a lease or plan a life, expresses the contempt in which the ruling class holds all workers.

The postdocs' struggle unfolds under the shadow of the Trump administration's systematic assault on higher education—an American variant of the Nazi policy of *Gleichschaltung*, the forced synchronization of cultural and intellectual life with the demands of the state.

Columbia has played a shameful role in this. In July 2025, the university agreed to a \$220 million settlement with the Trump administration that included sweeping changes to admissions policies, curriculum reviews in Middle East-related fields, a ban on masks at protests, increased cooperation with the NYPD, and new requirements to provide the Department of Homeland Security with data on international students.

Columbia paved the way for this capitulation by suspending nearly 80 students for participating in a pro-Palestinian protest—the largest mass discipline in university history for a single action. The campus has become a police-controlled fortress. Over 300 disciplinary cases have been opened against anti-genocide students, with 122 suspended, over 50 evicted, and one expelled.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Gestapo agents roam the city streets attacking and detaining immigrants. Earlier this year, ICE agents arrested a Columbia senior after gaining access to her dorm room.

It is within this atmosphere of political repression that the contract fight is taking place, and international workers find themselves most directly in the crosshairs. The Trump administration has revoked over 1,500 student visas and threatened mass deportations. The demand for longer appointments is not merely a matter of professional stability—it is a bulwark against deportation. Columbia's refusal to grant year-long contracts to its overwhelmingly international postdoctoral workforce is of a piece with its broader collaboration with Trump's reign of terror.

Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker in Macungie, Pennsylvania and the rank-and-file socialist candidate for president of the UAW in this October's election, issued a statement in support of the postdocs Thursday night.

Lehman stated, "I support your fight without reservation and call on UAW members everywhere to back it."

He continued:

The stakes go beyond your contract. The same government that has unleashed ICE across the country and sent troops into American cities is waging imperialist war all over the world, and this apparatus has lined up behind it. Shawn Fain has publicly backed Trump's tariffs, telling autoworkers their enemy is workers abroad rather than the corporations that exploit them all, while promoting the UAW as the "arsenal of democracy." That nationalism is what leaves your colleagues on visas defenseless. I am the only candidate in this election who opposes US

imperialism, who fights for the international unity of the working class against the trade war, and who calls for the mobilization of workers to defend immigrants, abolish the ICE gestapo and stop the drive to dictatorship.

He concluded:

The only social force capable of breaking the grip of the financial oligarchy is the working class, organized independently of both parties and across every border. It alone can expropriate the wealth taken from us and reorganize economic life to meet human needs rather than to enrich billionaires and pay for world war. That is what I mean when I say I am a socialist.

The UAW bureaucracy has done nothing to defend its own members targeted by the Trump administration's campaign of political repression. Mahmoud Khalil, a former UAW member who was a graduate student at Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs until graduating in December 2024, was seized by ICE agents from his Manhattan apartment building on March 8, 2025, and flown to the LaSalle immigration jail in Louisiana, where he was held in isolation for 104 days. A legal permanent resident married to a US citizen and father of an infant son, Khalil has never been charged with a crime—his sole "offense" was serving as a leading spokesperson for the campus protests against the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza.

A federal judge ruled his detention unconstitutional in June 2025, but the administration has pressed on, and in September a Louisiana immigration judge ordered him deported to Syria or Algeria—a transparent act of political retaliation that Khalil himself has described as a "kangaroo immigration court" ruling meant "to silence anyone who stands against genocide in Gaza." Throughout this ordeal, the UAW apparatus has offered nothing but hollow statements, refusing to mobilize its hundreds of thousands of members and three-quarters-of-a-billion-dollar strike fund in defense of a dues-paying worker—the same bureaucracy that now sits on an overwhelming strike authorization vote at Columbia rather than lead workers into struggle.

The postdocs have demonstrated their willingness to fight. The question is whether that fight will advance—or be smothered by the same UAW bureaucracy that has systematically betrayed academic workers across the country.

Postdocs must learn from their past experiences. In 2023, Columbia postdocs authorized a strike by 98 percent; the UAW bureaucracy kept them on the job and, ultimately, no strike was called. The agreement that averted a strike was nothing more than a sellout, creating the evermore unlivable and dangerous conditions facing these workers.

This past April, the UAW International denied strike approval to over 3,000 student workers at Columbia who had voted by 91.5 percent to authorize a strike and by 82.2 percent to set a strike date. UAW Region 9A Director Mancilla ordered the student workers to water down demands for "cops off campus," ICE protections, and divestment from weapons manufacturers and companies complicit in Israel's Gaza genocide. When workers refused, the bureaucracy simply vetoed their strike.

In March 2026, the UAW kept 40,000 UC academic workers on the job for weeks after their contracts expired, defying a 93.3 percent strike authorization vote.

This is not a series of tactical errors. The union bureaucracy, whose officials draw six-figure salaries from workers' dues, is bound to the corporations and the capitalist state by a million threads. Its role is to channel working-class anger into dead-end procedures, isolate struggles

from one another, and, when necessary, crush them outright.

Fain, hailed as a militant by the "left" organizations in and around the Democratic Party, has presided over the suppression of strike after strike while maintaining complicit silence on the US-Israeli war against Iran and Trump's transformation of the presidency into a dictatorship. At the same time, Fain has given his full-throated support to Trump's tariffs based on the lie that throwing Canadian and Mexican autoworkers out of their jobs is a gain for American workers.

The postdocs can win widespread support for their fight. Across New York City, the working class is in motion. Contracts for 40,000 transit workers have expired, raising the prospect of a strike that could paralyze the city. Workers at the Guggenheim Museum, public defenders, and legal services staff have all authorized or initiated strikes in recent months. The conditions driving postdocs to vote overwhelmingly to strike are the conditions confronting the entire working class.

The path forward requires a decisive break from the UAW's strategy of defeat. Postdocs must not wait for the bureaucracy to set a strike date—they must organize to impose their own decision. This means forming rank-and-file committees that take control of the struggle out of the hands of the apparatus and place it directly in workers' hands. These committees must reach out to graduate student workers at Columbia, whose own strike has been blocked by the UAW, and, as well, appeal for solidarity from transit workers, building workers, healthcare workers and autoworkers throughout the New York area and beyond.

This necessitates that postdocs reject the UAW's subordination of their struggle to the Democratic Party. The Democrats are not an ally. It was under Biden that the witch-hunt against pro-Palestinian speech began, student visas were first targeted, and police were unleashed on campus encampment protests. The Democratic Party is a party of Wall Street, austerity and war. This includes so-called "left Democrats" and "democratic socialists" like New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani. A prominent member of the DSA, Mamdani has demonstrated over the last eight months that his administration serves the interests of Wall Street. Most recently, Mamdani filed a lawsuit to block \$10,000 bonuses to poverty-stricken city paraprofessionals.

Most importantly, this fight must be developed on an international foundation. The attacks on international workers are an expression of the nationalist poison the ruling class uses to divide workers along national lines. The answer is not to appeal for mercy from immigration authorities but to assert the unity of all workers, regardless of national origin, in a common fight against the capitalist system.

The strike authorization vote is one expression of the political radicalization and militancy of the American working class. The task is to ensure this is not dissipated by the union bureaucracy, nor channeled into the Democratic Party dead end and defeated. What is required is rank-and-file control and the development of an industrial and political counter-offensive against both corporate-controlled parties and the capitalist system they defend. This requires the fight for the socialist reorganization of society in which the immense resources hoarded by the financial oligarchy and squandered on war are redirected to meet the needs of the vast majority.

For information on building a rank-and-file committee, fill out the form below.



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