Columbia University postdocs narrowly ratify contract with cuts in real wages

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Postdoctoral workers at Columbia University in New York City narrowly ratified a three-year contract that locks in real wage cuts. Some 41.4 percent voted against the deal, which provides roughly 3 percent annual raises for current workers. Meanwhile, inflation in the city runs at 4.5 percent, making the deal a net pay cut. Columbia Postdoctoral Workers-United Auto Workers (CPW-UAW) Local 4100 covers around 1,000 postdoctoral researchers, associate research scientists and associate research scholars.

The October 20 tentative agreement blocked an October 21 strike, after postdocs authorized a walkout by over 90 percent. Instead of striking against one of the wealthiest universities in the country, CPW-UAW brought back an agreement which abandoned or watered down nearly all significant demands workers were fighting for.

The union's May bargaining proposal called for a $90,000 postdoc minimum, rising to $99,225, and $115,000 for associate research scientists. Under the new contract, the minimum salary for newly hired postdocs instead rises from $72,116 to $74,000, then to $74,500 in July 2027 and $75,000 in July 2028—an increase of just 4 percent over the full term. The minimum for associate research scientists rises by the same 4 percent, from $79,327 to $82,500 at the end of the contract. Workers received roughly one-tenth of the increase in minimum pay they had sought.

Current workers get a $300 base pay increase and a 3 percent raise, a $200 increase and 3 percent in 2027, and 3 percent in 2028, about 10 percent over three years. The agreement makes no mention of back pay, although the old contract expired on June 30 and the last guaranteed raise was in July 2025.

If today's soaring inflation continues, the contract will significantly cut real wages, especially for new hires on minimum salaries. New York City inflation has remained above 3 percent since 2021, peaking at 6.1 percent in 2022. Manhattan's median rent has reached $5,375 a month. MIT's living wage calculator puts annual living costs at $79,469 for a single adult in Manhattan—above the new postdoc minimum—and $126,705 for a parent with one child.

Most bargaining-unit members are international and live under the shadow of ICE raids and visa revocations. The union withdrew demands for a $1 million Immigration Support Fund, a campus ICE/DHS protocol, 180-day job protection if work authorization lapses, guaranteed remote work or leave for workers stranded abroad, and confidentiality of immigration status. What remains is a minor increase in visa renewal reimbursement from $1,250 to $1,500, five paid days for visa stamp renewals and a list of immigration attorneys.

Nothing was won on job security. Appointments and visa sponsorships remain at the University's "sole discretion" and are explicitly excluded from the grievance process. The demand to replace precarious three- and six-month posts with year-long appointments was not won.

The union withdrew demands for a $500 monthly housing subsidy, guaranteed eligibility for university housing and a 3 percent cap on annual rent increases, along with demands on parking, transportation and vacations. The subsidy alone was worth $6,000 a year—more than twice the entire three-year increase in the postdoc minimum.

The union's role in discrimination cases was weakened, and the language on intellectual-property meetings was softened. The union also agreed to withdraw an unfair labor practice charge it filed against Columbia in September. Above all, the no-strike clause remains in force, tying workers' hands as inflation and the Trump administration's assault on universities and academic freedom continue.

Columbia's newly released 2026 financial statements from October 30 show investment gains of $2.71 billion, up from $1.71 billion the previous year, while spending on the entire workforce rose just 1 percent. Even after the University drew $1 billion from the endowment for operations, it grew nearly $2 billion, from $15.92 billion to $17.91 billion—a 12.5 percent increase. The operating surplus reached $259.2 million, more than double the previous year's $112.6 million, and total net assets rose to $22.69 billion.

Against these staggering figures, the cost of the postdocs' demands was trivial. Expressing the contempt of the ruling class for all workers, it insisted that highly skilled workers, whose research underpins Columbia's prestige and hundreds of millions in federal grants.

The 41.4 percent "no" vote expresses significant opposition to the sellout contract and the UAW apparatus, which accepted Columbia's "last, best and final offer," abandoning central

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demands despite an overwhelming strike mandate. In August, over 90 percent authorized a strike, with record turnout of some 850 members, after six months of negotiations failed to produce gains. These workers were prepared to fight the university's stonewalling.

The UAW bureaucracy has also deliberately isolated academic workers' contract struggles from one another.

Columbia's 3,000 graduate student workers have been negotiating alongside CPW-UAW, with their previous contract expired for over a year. Members of Student Workers of Columbia (SWC-UAW) voted 91.5 percent to strike in March, but the UAW International blocked them. UAW Region 9A officials threatened SWC with receivership unless it removed member-approved political demands, including "cops off campus," ICE protections and divestment from weapons manufacturers. Region 9A Director Brandon Mancilla, a Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) member elevated by UAW President Shawn Fain, withheld strike approval until those demands were gutted.

Student workers at NYU and the New School in New York City are both under the UAW and are currently fighting for a new contract. Four thousand UAW Harvard graduate workers are currently on strike for a new contract. When another Harvard UAW union of academic workers voted to strike alongside graduate workers earlier this year, the bargaining committee and UAW Region 9A called the strike off.

Uniting academic workers across universities and cities around shared demands would create immense power. The UAW apparatus instead divides workers and suppresses a broader struggle—the same playbook used in auto and throughout the AFL-CIO.

As we wrote in August when Columbia postdocs authorized strike action,

> 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.
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> Fain, hailed as a militant by the pseudo-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 struggle at Columbia unfolds amid political and economic crisis. The Trump administration is spending ever larger sums on war and tariffs while slashing research funding and imposing its dictates on universities. Columbia agreed last year to a $221 million settlement with the administration, including increased cooperation with the NYPD and sharing international students' data with the Department of Homeland Security. The US-Israeli war against Iran has also driven up energy prices, which rose 21.5 percent in the New York area over the past year.

The Columbia struggle also unfolds amid an eruption of class struggle in the US and internationally, including massive protests and strikes against inequality and repression across Europe. In New York City, alongside academic workers seeking new contracts, 90,000 DC 37 municipal workers have seen their contract expire, while tens of thousands of transit workers have worked under an expired contract since May. All face the same attacks on wages, conditions and democratic rights.

The union bureaucracy and DSA are doing everything to block a movement from below, keeping it tied to the Democratic Party. New York City DSA Mayor Zohran Mamdani has repudiated his modest affordability reforms, assuring the ruling class he can oversee its state. DSA members in the UAW apparatus police academic workers' demands on Columbia's behalf.

The midterm repudiation of the Trump administration's policies of war and dictatorship foreshadows a major upsurge in class struggle. Academic workers must prepare to join it by fighting for the working class's political independence from both capitalist parties.

Academic workers must build independent rank-and-file committees to wrest control of the struggle from the apparatus. These committees must unite workers at Columbia, the New School and NYU with educators, transit, healthcare and logistics workers across New York and beyond in a common struggle.



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