

NYU strike authorization vote begins as graduate workers continue strike at Columbia University

Our reporters
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While over 3,000 graduate student workers at Columbia are continuing their strike over higher wages and health care, grad students at New York University also began balloting to authorize strike action on Tuesday. The week-long vote is being carried out by some 2,000 graduate students in the Graduate Student Organizing Committee-United Auto Workers (GSOC-UAW) union who work as teaching and research assistants at the university.

The strike vote was called after over 9 months of negotiations, in the course of which GSOC-UAW made several significant concessions to the university. However, NYU has effectively refused to address any of the central demands by the graduate student workers. Its last offer was a \$1/hour increase for both Masters and PhD students over a six-year period, which would amount to a de facto lowering of the wages, given the rising cost of living and inflation. One graduate worker told the *World Socialist Web Site* that these proposals were “comical.”

At the NYU rally, Maida Rosenstein, the president of the UAW Local 2110, gave a demagogic two-minute speech, reiterating time and again that “GSOC is here to stay” and that she was confident that they would “win a great contract.” Such empty platitudes are the surest sign that the UAW is already working feverishly to shut down the struggles of graduate workers at Columbia and NYU as quickly as possible.

In fact, at a meeting last week at NYU, Rosenstein discouraged GSOC members from trying to make their strike coincide with that at Columbia University, saying they shouldn’t be influenced by “outside factors.” In what was likely a slip of the tongue, she also said that the strike at Columbia was “I believe only timed for

two weeks,” meaning it would be shut down by this weekend. The NYU strike authorization vote is set to end the following Monday on March 30.

When IYSSE members told graduate student workers at Columbia University about these remarks a graduate worker in the English studies department, responded, “Giving up now or giving in now because the administration or union say so would be the exact opposite of what we need. I do hope NYU goes on strike. I feel like at this point you can’t have graduate students be the pawns to be deployed when you feel like it and brought back when the admin thinks it’s been enough... There are people all over the world who are picketing. I hope that would be enough to counter this.”

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality has intervened at both Columbia University and NYU to discuss its recent statement that warns of the isolation and sell-out of both strikes by the UAW. Haider, a PhD student at NYU’s Steinhardt School of Culture, Education and Human Development, expressed support for uniting their struggle with that of the Columbia grad workers and appealing to the working class more broadly: “I’m fully for it. A united struggle is necessary to move forward.”

“21 dollars an hour is still a poverty wage. It’s infuriating to sit there and get a lecture from some lawyer [who works for NYU] making a six-figure salary about how ‘money doesn’t matter.’ I have heard too many horror stories from my friends and colleagues about their struggles to get by.

“We have to pay many thousands of dollars out of pocket and NYU says ‘it’s your problem.’ It is almost impossible to get by unless you come from money.

Each of my students pays the university about 5K to take my class and I take home around 5K at the end of the semester. I've had to work 2-3 jobs to survive."

Many graduate workers expressed skepticism about both the UAW and the Democratic Party and indicated that they considered themselves socialists, but also said that they hoped that the union could still be reformed. Jackson, a graduate student in the Department of Applied Physics and Mathematics at Columbia University, said, "It's important to fight for the things we're owed: a living wage, health care, etc. Bollinger [Columbia University President] makes \$4.6 million a year, but apparently proper health care coverage is too much to ask for."

In discussing the role of the UAW, Jackson said, "It is unfortunate how much of the union leadership has been co-opted, especially since the 1970s and 1980s under Reagan and with financialization. However, I still hope that we can eventually have a more radical leadership."

An IYSSE member explained that the transformation of the unions over the past decades was an objective, international process, rooted in the globalization of production which had undermined all the national programs upon which the unions and other labor bureaucracies had been based.

Graduate student workers can only develop and expand their struggles through a political break with the Democratic Party and the trade unions, and by turning to the international working class and a socialist perspective. There is, in fact, widespread support for the strikers in the working class, despite an almost complete media blackout of the Columbia strike.

Amber, a graduate from Columbia's Teachers College who now works as a charter school teacher in New York City, sent in a statement of support for the strike following last week's meeting of the New York Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee: "As an alumna graduate student of Teachers College, Columbia University, I stand in solidarity and support of the GWC-UAW strike. Following over two years of failed bargaining attempts, Columbia University must respond to the demands of its graduate [workers] as their service is vital to the overall quality of research and instruction Columbia seeks to offer for its students.

"With the highest tuition in the country, the university is contributing to the skyrocketing \$1.7 trillion student

debt crisis which now affects more than 45 million Americans and leaves graduates entering the workforce with an average debt rate of \$30,000. With such an exhaustively expensive tuition plus an \$11.8 million endowment issued just this year, there is no reason why Columbia shouldn't be able to provide its graduate TAs with an equitable wage, rent relief, and safe conditions to work amid a global pandemic."

A worker in Oakland, California issued a warning about the UAW to graduate workers at NYU and Columbia: "Hold the line against union leadership that has consistently conceded to management for crumbs against the wishes of the rank-and-file. The UAW has over \$800 million in strike funds specifically for fights like this. The WSWS has done many great articles covering the illegal activities of UAW international president and leadership over the past couple years." He also pointed to the Hunts Point strike that was sold out by the Teamsters and the Democrats in January. "Look at the Hunts Point Teamsters strike in NYC a couple of months ago. The union leadership conceded to not even a one dollar per hour raise but only to \$0.61."

This broad support for the strike can and must be mobilized and armed with a socialist program in order to develop a counteroffensive by the working class internationally against decades of austerity and the homicidal response by the capitalist class to the pandemic. We encourage graduate students at NYU and Columbia who want to discuss this perspective with us to reach out to the IYSSE today.



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