

“What is this union for if we're getting exactly what Columbia wanted to give us?”

Anger among Columbia University support staff as SEIU rams through sellout contract with de facto pay cuts

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Last Friday, the 1199 SEIU union chapter for around 350 clerical, library, technical and cafeteria workers at Columbia University in New York City rammed through a sellout contract with de facto pay cuts. Facing significant opposition from the rank-and-file, the union leadership resorted to anti-democratic measures and intimidation tactics to bully workers into ratifying the contract by 172 votes in favor to 54 against.

While the union boasted of “huge victories” in the three-year contract, the agreement contains just three percent annual raises for workers, who are some of the lowest paid at Columbia (According to their last contract, the lowest paid workers in both areas started at just \$18/hour in 2021). This “increase” results in a pay cut in real terms for workers amid historic inflation, currently at 8.5 percent in the US. For cafeteria workers, who get temporary furloughed during the summer, the contract increased their weekly layoff pay by a mere \$35 a week, from \$220 to \$255.

The full contract was never sent out to the membership to review before the vote, and the union did everything it could to stifle open discussion on its terms.

In the lead-up to the vote, an “Open Letter to the Union Leadership,” which was shared with the WSWS, was sent out by a group of angry rank-and-file workers to the entire union membership. The scathing letter called out the “narcoleptic” union leadership for keeping membership in the dark during contract negotiations and for canceling and mismanaging picketing events.

Expressing the gulf between the rank-and-file workers and the union bureaucracy, the letter stated that chapter leadership “chastised us for conveying the sense that we viewed the union as a third party, that it was something other than this chapter and its members and working in some way against us or in disregard of our issues and concerns. If any of us does think of the union this way, one need only consider the foregoing for the reasons why.

“But contributing as much if not more is the sense, never more acutely felt than this year, of the failure of the union to represent us at the bargaining table on the matter of wages.”

The letter also addressed the leadership’s attempt to blame the membership for poor turnout at meetings. “When the outcome of contract after contract seems to be foregone, who can blame

membership for checking out? Many members didn’t bother to fill out the union’s contract survey because experience has taught them it’s pointless. Meanwhile, the survey that one delegate independently sent out to members, tailored for the specificity of this chapter by an actual member affected by the outcome of these negotiations, was received positively and filled out by more members than the union’s survey. The union responded by demanding membership ignore it and threatening them with summary dismissal as a delegate.”

The letter powerfully concluded, “Any contract that doesn’t address inflation, the elephant in the room, means cutbacks, means taking an effective pay cut even as rents and the cost of basic goods and services continue to rise. In response to our concerns, the Bargaining Committee has insisted that ours is a choice between wages and benefits. We don’t accept that choice. The choice between wages and benefits is no choice at all. For some of us, perhaps for many if not most of us, the only choice is to be adequately compensated to meet the demands of the cost of living that our ‘non-profit’ employer profits from. If there are cutbacks, we will fight back.”

The response of the union’s lead organizer to the open letter was to state that the email was not authorized and to ask members to disregard it.

Donna, a rank-and-file clerical worker at Columbia and one of the authors of the Open Letter, spoke to the WSWS about their struggle. Her name has been changed due to her desire to remain anonymous out of concern over possible union retaliation.

“I wish 1199SEIU didn’t sell us out,” Donna said in response to the vote outcome. “They gave Columbia a contract that they wanted.

“The union pushes back when we say, ‘We need a better contract, we need higher wages, can we please continue to fight?’ They say, ‘Oh, well Columbia is trying to take away your health care benefits.’ Some of the leadership folks are really just pushing these types of lies out like, ‘Do you want to lose your health care? If we don’t pass this contract, what if Columbia takes away your health care?’ But it’s hard enough to find people to fill these positions. It’s just a lot of fear-mongering going on and a lot of people are pissed off about it.’

In response to the open letter, Donna said that its authors were denounced and a false and provocative rumor was circulated by the leadership claiming that, because of the email, Columbia lowered its

raises from 3.5 percent to three percent. However, “Some people responded to the open letter by saying that this was the clearest communication they’ve ever received regarding the union. We voiced an opinion that many people shared. But we don’t want to come out because essentially we’re kind of dealing with thuggish activity, with the intimidation from a very powerful union.”

At the beginning of negotiations, the union was asking for a seven percent annual increase. “Even that was down from what I wanted,” Donna said. “And then they went to five percent and we’re like, ‘Five is the bare minimum.’ That was what membership said when my colleague did this poll to get a sense of what people are really feeling. Then [the leadership] can represent them at bargaining. How revolutionary would that be, to actually represent your constituents? Wages were number one and five percent was the lowest that workers were willing to go.”

In the lead-up to the contract vote—which the union made an in-person-only vote—workers remotely campaigned for a “no” vote. After arriving at a tentative agreement, the union announced an in-person informational meeting on a Friday at 6PM, saying it would be on Monday afternoon. Many workers, including Donna, couldn’t attend given the short notice. “They’re not making any accommodations for their workers. They’re not wanting anybody to show up,” she explained.

Following this, the union held smaller team Zoom meetings, with the comments section turned off, to quickly scroll through the contract and sell it to workers. “This was the only way of accessing the contract and they didn’t really let us talk.”

About the in-person-only vote last Thursday, Donna commented, “This is easily voter suppression. There is no question in my head and it’s just really disturbing to me.” She stated that many clerical staff work remotely, with some on vacation this week due to the Labor Day weekend.

The union never sent the full contract to its members before the vote, and the agreement could only be handled by workers at the polling center in front of union officials. “I can’t even think of anybody who would get a contract and would not be allowed to take it home to read it or process it, but only allowed to read it in front of everybody.”

Donna also spoke about the struggle against Columbia University, one of the wealthiest universities in the country, with an endowment of over \$14 billion. In the 2021 fiscal year, Columbia earned a 32.3 percent return on its endowment stock market portfolio, totalling some \$3 billion.

“Columbia is an employer with no problems with finances. It is a landlord, a hospital owner—they have all of this money and they’re building new buildings and doing construction, but we’re the other infrastructure that they’re not tending to. The infrastructure of making the university run is so low on their priorities. I expected to be getting a lot more because of this inflation crap that we’re dealing with.

“These new contracts are making people poorer. They’re saying we’re getting a three percent raise, but no!—with rent going up in New York, goods and services, food prices... three percent covers none of that. None of that! And then they’re like, ‘Well, here’s a one-time \$500 bonus,’ but of course that gets taxed at a higher rate.”

Donna said learning about the origins of 1199 had been inspiring, and how different an organization it is today. Formerly called The National Health Care Workers’ Union, 1199 got its start in New York City in the 1930s in drug stores and became active in the surrounding hospitals in the 50s. “It had such a promising beginning. But then just

more and more giving in and giving in to the point of which, I think it makes you question the point of the union today. It makes me ask, ‘What is this union for if we’re getting exactly what Columbia wanted to give us?’”

Donna expressed enthusiasm over the growth of the international class struggle. “It seems like there’s a real energy right now and I think this is the moment—now is the time. People don’t want to work for these low wages.”

Workers in every industry, facing attacks on their working and living conditions, are looking for a way to fight, but are up against a corporatist trade union apparatus that works to isolate, smother and suppress these struggles. To counter this workers must form independent and democratically-run rank-and-file committees in opposition to the union bureaucracy to create conditions for the development of genuine workers’ democracy, facilitating free discussion among workers, coordinating information-sharing and planning common action among the broadest sections of the working class.

Donna emphasized the necessity for organizations where workers can wage a unified and broad struggle for what workers actually need, “instead of the [union] leadership just saying, ‘here’s your contract.—we tried.’”

As stressed in yesterday’s article, “The political issues confronting American workers on Labor Day 2022”:

“The highest expression of this growing rebellion of the working class is the campaign of Will Lehman, a Pennsylvania Mack Trucks worker and socialist candidate for president of the United Auto Workers union. Lehman has received powerful support from autoworkers, teachers, railroad workers and other sections of the working class for his call for the abolition of the labor bureaucracies and the transfer of power to rank-and-file workers.

“Lehman has called for the formation of rank-and-file committees in every factory and workplace and the coordination of struggles across national boundaries through the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

“The independent organization of the working class must be connected to the building of a socialist leadership in the working class. There is not a single problem confronting workers—exploitation and inequality, the threat of fascism and dictatorship, imperialist war—that can be resolved within the framework of the capitalist system.”



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