

# Columbia University graduate students set to strike in New York City

By Josh Varlin  
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Amid an international wave of educators' struggles, 3,000 graduate students at Columbia University in New York City are set to begin a weeklong strike today after the university refused to negotiate with the Graduate Workers of Columbia-United Auto Workers (GWC-UAW) Local 2110. The students, who work as teaching and research assistants (TAs and RAs, respectively), voted 93 percent in favor of a strike.

The union said the walkout would begin at 10 am Tuesday if the university does not agree to bargain. The strike is scheduled to last from April 24 to April 30, with picketing in front of academic buildings and delivery entrances.

Columbia TAs and RAs make poverty-level wages: less than \$23,000 for a teaching assistant, on average. The median teaching assistant salary is about \$4,000 higher, according to 2016 figures from Glassdoor.com, which aggregates salaries. The national average for part-time work, in comparison, is \$24,500, still more than what Columbia TAs make. Graduate students must often take on exorbitant debt—above and beyond the debt they have from their undergraduate degrees—in order to finance their education.

Graduate students also lack essential benefits like vision and dental insurance, despite Columbia having an endowment of \$10 billion. According to the *College Hill Independent*, “Researchers and TAs also face late or irregular paychecks, jeopardizing their housing and financial security.”

These stipends must sustain university workers in one of the most expensive cities on Earth, especially in terms of housing. A 2015 report estimated that a worker would need to make \$44.60 an hour to have the median Manhattan rent be considered affordable (under 30 percent of income).

Graduate students' broader grievances are motivated

in part by their increased workload, as higher education becomes increasingly corporatized. The *College Hill Independent* reports, “With the decline of tenured or tenure-track jobs in academia, from 57 percent in 1957 to 30 percent in 2011 according to the *New Yorker*, graduate workers are taking on a steadily rising amount of universities' undergraduate instruction and research, often with low pay or uncertain funding.”

Graduate students voted to unionize in December 2016 after a protracted legal dispute. The GWC was certified last year by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) as the students' bargaining representative. Columbia administrators have refused to bargain with the union in a blatant violation of labor law, and have pursued legal action, arguing that Columbia graduate students have no right to organize.

The case is being decided through appellate courts rather than before the NLRB. Both the unions and the university note that the NLRB, based on its composition of Democratic or Republican appointees, has issued contradictory rulings on whether graduate students at private universities have the right to organize. Graduate student unions at Yale University, Boston College and the University of Chicago have all withdrawn petitions for recognition by the NLRB rather than face an unfavorable ruling from the board, whose majority now consists of Trump administration appointees.

Columbia Provost John Coatsworth, in an email prior to the strike, announced that the university will circulate “contingency plans that fully respect both the right of strikers to express their views and the right of all students and faculty to continue teaching and learning.” In other words, the university will work to have the strike have as little impact as possible.

The email concludes, “Columbia is a world-class

university and our responsibility is to protect and enhance what makes it so—even when it means standing up for what we believe is essential to do that, including when others in our community hold sharply different views. That is what makes Columbia a uniquely vibrant academic community ...” This statement, which fraudulently portrays the dispute as a difference of opinion, akin to an academic debate, is aimed at concealing the university’s insistence that grad workers remain a cheap labor force with no rights.

Students are willing to fight for living wages and decent conditions. However, students cannot rely on the GWC-UAW or other graduate student unions to carry forward their struggle. The GWC has already announced the strike will end April 30, even if the administration does not agree to bargain, and the unions have every intention to isolate the struggle as they have done to countless other betrayed strikes.

The GWC-UAW has pledged to end the strike before finals begin, minimizing its impact and letting the administration know it can wait out the students. The *Columbia Spectator* has also reported that “the union will not require any graduate students to participate in the strike, so graduate students may continue grading and teaching classes throughout the course of the strike.”

Columbia students must assimilate the lessons of the 12-day strike by graduate students at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where the Graduate Employees Union-Illinois Federation of Teachers (GEO-IFT) was able to push through a deal that keeps students’ wages thousands of dollars below the minimum living wage in the area and did not contain guaranteed tuition waivers.

GWC, like GEO, is allied with the Democratic Party, which has pioneered attacks on education nationally and in New York. The UAW has sought to organize university workers because it has lost over a million members in the auto industry due to decades of collaboration with the corporations and the government in the downsizing of the industry and the impoverishment of autoworkers. The UAW is currently mired in a corruption scandal after its negotiators accepted bribes from Fiat Chrysler Automotive to sign company friendly contracts, which included, among other things, the halving of wages of new hires and a vast expansion of part-time workers.

Graduate students’ allies in the fight for decent working conditions and accessible education are students and workers internationally, not the unions and the capitalist parties to which they kowtow. University students in France are engaging in protests and occupations against restrictions to higher education and in support of striking workers. Teachers in Arizona will begin a statewide strike on April 26 and lecturers in Kenya have been on strike for weeks. Lecturers in the United Kingdom and teachers in Oklahoma and West Virginia are still restless after their strikes were sold out by the unions.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality and its parent organization, the Socialist Equality Party, fight for the unity of the working class internationally to guarantee decent jobs and basic social rights, including the right to a free high-quality education.

To pursue this fight, Columbia University graduate students must break from the UAW and form a rank-and-file committee that will fight for the active support of teachers, health care workers and every other section of the powerful working class in New York City.

Students interested in taking up this struggle should contact the IYSSE.

To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>