

Graduate student-workers strike faces continued intransigence from Columbia University

By Steve Light and Alan Whyte
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Three thousand graduate student workers at Columbia University in New York City are continuing their strike amidst and expanding wave of teacher protests throughout the US and internationally. Many participated in a rally on Thursday in New York City.

The graduate students make a living as research and teaching assistants while pursuing their academic degrees. The trigger for the walkout that began April 24 was the refusal of the university administration to bargain with the recently certified union, the Graduate Workers of Columbia–United Auto Workers (GWC-UAW) Local 2110.

Institutions of higher education have been increasing the proportion of lower-paid, part-time, temporary teachers and other support workers, which are replacing higher-paid, tenured faculty, even as tuitions soar. The GWC is made up of research and teaching assistants who average less than the poverty wage of \$23,000 in one of the most expensive cities in the world.

The teachers at Columbia have faced the intransigence of government, business and university officials, raising fundamental strategic and political issues.

Under the mistaken belief that the UAW would lead a struggle for their rights, graduate students placed themselves under the guidance of what is essentially a business organization. The UAW has collaborated in the restructuring of the auto industry, including the imposition of poverty-level wages for new hires and a growing workforce of temporary, part-time and outsourced labor with low or no benefits.

Columbia University is one of the most highly selective universities, geared especially toward training the future ruling elite. Its attitude toward the graduate student workers is in line with the ruthless stance of the ruling class to the working class.

The Columbia administration threatened an injunction against a picket line the GWC had planned for Thursday at the Columbia University Medical Center in upper Manhattan, in an effort to win wider support in the extensive Columbia holdings. The union responded by canceling the event.

The GWC-UAW strike was set for the end of the semester for one week ending on April 30th, the last day of classes, a period when the workload for graduate student workers is particularly high. They are not holding office hours, grading papers and exams, or working on research for the 20 hours per week paid for by Columbia.

However, after the end of the strike on Monday they will be under tremendous pressure to complete any work missed. The Columbia administration is prepared to ride out the week of job action, rescheduling classes to off-campus locations with the blessing of the union, resuming full operations when finals begin next week.

WSWS reporters interviewed strikers and supporters at the Thursday rally.

Catilin is a striking teacher's assistant in the field of medical science and history. Asked about the connection between the struggle of graduate student workers and the struggle of the teachers throughout the country, she said, "The teachers are defending a strong public education, which is necessary in a democracy. Columbia University is similar to a business and is seeking to take advantage of free labor. There is strength in numbers, and all the workers need to be united in a broad coalition."

Alejandro, a political science student said, "It is shocking that the school is not bargaining in light of the high endowment that they have. The workers are not even asking for that much. Three fourths of my classes are taught by teaching assistants. They won't be able to grade any of our finals because they are out here picketing for

the basics. It is the same struggle that the teachers in different states are engaged in. They need health insurance, livable wages. That is not a lot to ask for.”

Two graduate students from the Physics Department, Davio Cianci who is a research assistant and Kiley Kennedy who is a teaching assistant, spoke to the WSWS. Davio explained, “It is no coincidence that this and other struggles are in the education field. More than seventy percent of the work in higher education is done by contingent faculty because they can pay us so much cheaper. Next the New School in New York City will also be going on strike. We are all educators. There is a huge need for change.”

“A lot of this is in response to the Trump administration,” added Kiley, “and defending education is motivating a lot of passion from educators. I hope the Columbia strike motivates others.”

Davio said, “Education is reproductive labor, the necessity to keep more students and labor going on and into the productive process. The administration says we should be willing to do it just for the sake of the students and not the money.” Kiley stated, “In Arizona, the teachers said it should be about valuing educators.”

“There is talk about extending the strike beyond April 30th,” David said. “We will continue fighting if we are not getting where we want to go in this. We discuss among the union making a broader struggle.”

A retired teacher from Baruch College, and a member of the Professional Staff Congress union for CUNY, stated her support for the strike. She added, however, “They are being too mild here. They are not hurting the university if they are going to be handing in the grades.”

Scott Martin, an adjunct faculty at the School of International Public Affairs, was at Thursday’s rally even though adjunct professors are not on strike. “I need a union at Columbia, too, like there is at the New School and at Barnard College. I am a UAW member at the New School. We put in the same time for our courses here as permanent professors, but we have no regular office space to work in. We come for a few hours and then have to travel to our jobs at other schools. We have to have two or three different teaching jobs to make enough.”

A striking history teaching assistant said, “The kind of work we do has been devalued. Grad students are trying to get recognition. I think education and what we do is valuable. The way resources are allocated is out of alignment with what is needed. The way they pay themselves millions of dollars is looting. Resources are allocated to wealthy people. In fact, the president of

Columbia University [Lee Bollinger, annual income \$1.4 million] is not really qualified. In 2014, he received a vote of no confidence from the faculty. There is no one to hold him accountable. But this is true across educational environments.”

The UAW has no strategy to secure the interests of graduate student workers, let alone turn out to the working class as a whole. Instead, it is encouraging an orientation to the Democratic Party. Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer was invited to speak at the rally to maintain the pretext that the Democratic-controlled city and state governments are on the side of the workers rather than the Columbia trustees, who are deeply involved in the city’s corrupt real estate and business dealings.

The unions continue to support Governor Andrew Cuomo, despite his history of attacks on workers and educators, including attacking pensions and tenure. In exchange for their collaboration, Cuomo recently signed a bill that will make it easier for the unions to recruit new members and increase their dues base.

In speaking to graduate students, WSWS reporters urged lecturers to unite their own struggle with those of teachers and the working class. Rather than dissipating their efforts on lobbying the corporate politicians, the WSWS urged student workers to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the unions through the election of rank-and-file committees, and to reach out to the millions of workers in the New York City area to engage in a common struggle.

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