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International Youth and Students for Social Equality (US)
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Expand the Columbia graduate student strike!

More than 3,000 graduate student workers at Columbia University in New York City are on an indefinite strike, demanding higher wages, better health care coverage and improved working conditions.

The students confront the bitter opposition of the university administration, which has already taken action to punish strikers.

Columbia has made clear its intentions to retaliate against striking student workers by docking their pay and making students repay portions of their stipends. The administration has created an online daily work-reporting system to identify all workers on strike and has even sent an e-mail to the student body asking students to report striking workers to their academic departments.

The claim by the university that there is no money to meet the demands of students is absurd. Columbia has an endowment of over \$11 billion. The school is the largest private owner of real estate in New York City with more than 200 properties, twice the number owned by the next largest private property-holder, New York University.

Graduate student workers at Columbia are up against powerful political interests. The school's Board of Trustees is a conglomerate of millionaires with deep ties to Wall Street, corporate America and the Democratic Party.

The president of Columbia University is Lee Bollinger, former president of the University of Michigan (1996–2002). Bollinger is a director of Graham Holdings Company (formerly the Washington Post Company). From 2007 to 2012, he was a director of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, where he also served as chair from 2010 to 2012. Bollinger's annual salary is a staggering \$4.7 million. Lisa Carney, a co-chair on the Board of Trustees, is also a "corporate turnaround specialist" formerly from Merrill Lynch-Bank of America.

Students, however, have powerful allies. The struggle at Columbia is part of a series of struggles at other universities. More than 1,200 graduate students at New York University are on the verge of initiating similar strike action against deteriorating working conditions and benefits.

At the University of Chicago, graduate student workers are demanding an extension of health insurance eligibility and emergency COVID-19 relief grants. At Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, grad students have authorized a strike to fight against unfair employment policies and practices. Other efforts are underway at Illinois State University, University of Maryland, Indiana University, University of New Mexico and many more campuses.

The conditions facing student-workers cannot be resolved on the campuses. There must be a turn to the mobilization of the entire working class against the ruling elite and the capitalist system.

The past year has demonstrated the political, economic and moral bankruptcy of capitalism. The ruling class responded to the pandemic by organizing a historically unprecedented bailout of the rich. The transfer of trillions of dollars to Wall Street was sanctioned by the nearly unanimous vote of both Democrats and Republicans for the so-called CARES Act, adopted last March.

Amid mass social misery and death, US billionaires have increased their wealth by \$1.4 trillion over the past year. The handout to the rich has been accompanied by a homicidal policy to force workers back on the job and students back in the classrooms so their parents can work.

While Biden claimed that his administration would “listen to the science,” the Democrats have continued Trump’s reckless policies in relationship to the pandemic, forcing schools and businesses to reopen before the vaccine is widely distributed.

Now, more than 500,000 people are dead in the US. Millions have joined the ranks of the unemployed or underemployed. Tens of thousands of workers have been evicted, are drowning in debt or have been thrown into poverty.

The response of the ruling class to the pandemic has produced enormous anger among workers. In fact, it was the wildcat walkouts by autoworkers that shut down the auto industry at the start of the pandemic. Educators, who have been at the forefront of the fight against the unsafe reopening of schools, have waged countless work actions, sick-outs, and other protests to demand an end to in-person learning.

Just this week, teachers in Oakland, California, rejected an effort to reopen schools for in-person learning at the end of this month.

A united fight of the working class requires the development of new organizations of struggle, and workers have begun forming a network of rank-and-file committees to coordinate action.

The so-called “unions” have done nothing to mobilize workers against the reckless and deadly policies of the ruling elite. Rather, they have worked systematically to suppress opposition and isolate struggles wherever they have broken out.

The union at Columbia University, the Graduate Workers of Columbia University (GWC), has affiliated with the United Auto Workers (UAW). However, as every auto worker knows, the UAW is a bribed tool of corporate management. The complete integration of the UAW with the auto companies has been well documented through the years-long exposure of a massive corruption scandal engulfing the entire leadership.

As for its role at Columbia, in 2018, UAW negotiated a secret deal with the Columbia University administration, unbeknownst to the members of the GWC, to block any strike action—the most powerful tool at workers’ disposal—until April 6, 2020. Columbia is again seeking a “no strike” clause for the current contract in negotiation.

As the March 15 strike deadline approached, the UAW began conceding on all the main demands—demands that clearly had wide support among student workers. These concessions included lowering the demand for stipend increases from 15 percent in October to 5 percent only three days before the strike. There is no doubt that the UAW will make further concessions.

Control of the strike cannot be left in the hands of the UAW, whose interests are directly tied to the same corporations and political establishment that control Columbia University.

The development of a powerful counter-offensive by the working class, organized independently of the corporatist unions, must be guided by a clear socialist program and perspective.

This requires a break with the Democratic Party, which controls New York City and now the White House, and all those organizations that claim that the interests of workers can be advanced through this right-wing party of Wall Street and militarism.

The Democrats, no less than the Republicans, are terrified of the growth of opposition from below. Their relentless promotion of the politics of racial and gender identity, so prevalent on the campuses, is aimed at dividing workers and blocking a unified struggle. However, the entire experience of the last year has demonstrated the correctness of the principle of Marxism that it is class that is the fundamental division in society.

It is not to the Democrats and the union executives that students should turn, but to teachers, auto workers, service workers, health care workers and the entire working class. This means the strike must be expanded.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality calls on striking graduate students to join the Educators Rank-and-File Committee, which is fighting to unify educators with other sections of the working class in a common struggle against the ruling elite. This must be combined with the development of a powerful political struggle against both corporate-controlled parties and for socialism.

Join the International Youth and Students for Social Equality and take up the fight for socialism! World Socialist 18.03.2021