

Why Columbia Graduate Workers Like Me Are on Strike

BY

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Graduate workers deserve to live decent lives now, not defer necessities like dental care or being able to make the rent to a distant future of decently paying academic jobs that never arrive. That's why Columbia graduate workers walked off the job last week.

Like workers at John Deere and Kellogg's plants across the South, Midwest, and West, and like teachers, hospital employees, and steelworkers elsewhere in the country, graduate workers in New York City's Morningside Heights are on strike. On November 3, the thirty-six-thousand-member Student Workers of Columbia (SWC)-UAW Local 2110 laid down our teaching, grading, and research and headed to the picket line.

Our demands for what would be a first contract are in line with those of other graduate student unions (including Harvard's, which is also set to strike on November 16): health care (including dental), neutral third-party arbitration in cases of harassment and discrimination (unsettlingly common within the hierarchical structures of higher education), and a wage which meets the cost of living in New York City.

This is the union's second strike this year. The first, which began in March, ended with a tentative agreement that was narrowly voted down by the unit. But the fight for a fair first contract began way back in 2017, when UAW Local 2110 was formally recognized by the university, yet the university nevertheless would not join the union at the bargaining table for over a year. More than two years and over eighty bargaining sessions later, Columbia student workers still have no contract.

Why has this fight dragged on for so long? The SWC bargaining committee recounts consistent stalling, recalcitrant bargaining, and constant stonewalling by the university's administration

when they do bargain, in addition to long delays and refusals to communicate between sessions. In playing this waiting game, Columbia is counting not only on the turnover which characterizes all campus organizing, as students graduate from their programs and are replaced by others unfamiliar with the contract fight, but is also betting that graduate workers will eventually prioritize their individual research, their relationships with faculty, and their careers over the union.

The academic sector has long depended upon the long-term under-compensated labor which graduate students are told is an unpleasant but necessary step on the path to a tenure-track appointment. But this myth no longer holds water in a crowded job market with ever narrowing prospects, leaving many graduate students consigned to endless adjunct positions. Graduate students want to live well now, want to build their families now, want to get dental work done now — not to defer these necessities to some distant future that depends upon a decently paying academic job that may never arrive.

If graduate students are coming to seem more and more like workers, mega-universities like Columbia are increasingly being recognized as the billionaire corporations that they are. On October 28, as SWU voted to establish a strike deadline, the university raked in almost \$28 million during the annual Columbia Giving Day. This sum pales in comparison to Columbia's investment income. Last year, the university received an annual return of 32.3 percent, bringing their endowment value to \$14.35 billion. During fiscal year 2021 Columbia's total net assets increased by \$3,332,388,000, or over \$3.3 billion.

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At the same time, the administration was pleading with graduate workers to be “realistic,” citing coronavirus-induced financial hardship as the reason for their supposed inability to meet the union’s contract demands. For universities like Columbia, the pandemic presented a key opportunity to double down on austerity measures while asking graduate workers, faculty, and staff to carry on with their work for the love of research and teaching, for the sake of students, and for the mission of the institution.

Meanwhile, the administration’s strike-breaking tactics are straight out of the union-busting playbook. Last Friday, graduate students received an email informing us that both wages and stipends would be cut for striking workers — despite Columbia’s earlier insistence that receiving stipends designated these workers as students, and thus ineligible for the protections of a union contract. Columbia’s attempt to classify instructors, teaching assistants, researchers, and others as something other than employees has clear precedents: think of how hard Uber and Lyft fought to keep treating drivers as independent contractors to avoid paying for health care and other benefits.

The loss of both payroll and stipend leaves many strikers in a precarious position, particularly because of Columbia’s sudden and unilateral decision to change the pay schedule for student workers late this summer. This move meant that all student workers began the fall semester with what amounted to a temporary pay cut.

In addition to changing the pay schedule and docking wages and stipends, Columbia’s tactics at the bargaining table have been focused on weakening the contract fight and dividing the unit. The administration has repeatedly attempted to force the union to undercut its own proposed package and bargain against itself.

Currently, none of the administration’s offers have extended the protections of a contract to the hourly workers among master’s and undergraduate students, even though both groups were recognized as part of the unit by the 2016 National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) decision which granted student workers at private universities the right to form a union. This historic 3 to 1 ruling rekindled the campus labor movement, sparking organizing drives at Harvard, Brown, and Georgetown, as well as other private and public universities.

Columbia’s undergraduate students, hot off the largest tuition strike in US history, have extended solidarity to the striking workers. Not only are undergraduates on the picket lines every day, but many used their meal plans to provide lunch for striking workers — until the university cruelly imposed new limits on to-go meals.

Graduate student organizers at Columbia feel, and rightly, that shrinking the unit and leaving

these workers behind would not only make the union weaker but would set a negative precedent for campaigns at other schools. Even the union’s name, which was changed earlier this year from “Graduate Workers of Columbia” to include all student workers, reflects this commitment.

If the 2016 *Columbia* NLRB decision set a historic precedent for graduate student organizing, the 2021 contract fight at the same school aims to set a standard for just compensation. We know that in this battle against institutional austerity, much is at stake, not only for graduate students at Columbia, but for the student workers across the country who have been consistently under-compensated for their vital labor.

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FILED UNDER

UNITED STATES

EDUCATION / UNIONS

HIGHER EDUCATION / GRADUATE ORGANIZING / COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY / STRIKES