



# New York: From Union Struggles to Class Struggle at The New School

Mo Sedlak Tue, 22/05/2018 - 20:33

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In the last weeks of summer term 2018, the New School, a private non-profit research university centered in Manhattan, New York City, was shaken by a series of struggles by its workers who were finally fighting back, and they won overwhelming solidarity from students.

After firing 32 cafeteria workers and, in the process, breaking the food workers' union on campus, UNITE HERE, plus stalling for three years bargaining on a new contract with the student academic workers' union, SENS-UAW and cutting all benefits for the non-unionized Student Advisors, the administration was facing an organized backlash. More on the attacks, the resistance, and the implications can be found on workerspower.net: <http://www.workerspower.net/us-politics/strikes-and-occupations-at-the-new-school>

However, both the strike of the student academic workers and the occupation of the cafeteria in solidarity with the food workers, ended a week before the term was over. While important partial victories were won, no group in the struggle has had their demands met nor is an acceptable solution yet in hand.

### Struggles and First Results: The occupation

The wave of resistance kicked off with the Mayday Occupation of the New School's cafeteria, organized mainly by undergraduate students and under the leadership of the Maoist 'Communist Student Group'. The occupation lasted for over two weeks, without attempts at evacuation, while the cafeteria became the focal point of the struggle. However, the political contradictions within the school also crystallized most openly there.

The thinly veiled anti-union message of the Maoists and Anarchists clashed with the bargaining strategy of the food workers' union UNITE HERE, and finally led to a situation where the UNITE HERE leadership was able to break their workers away from the more radical demands of the occupiers. The criticism of closed-door negotiations and the reluctant approach of the union bureaucracy was necessary to understand the negotiation dynamics and allowed the occupiers, initially, to win higher concessions than the union had aimed for.

However, the lack of a strategy for organizing within the existing union weakened calls for building autonomous economic organizations of workers on Campus and created widespread confusion about the role of a political group and that of a broader union in such struggles, which eventually alienated workers taking part in the struggle. The 'Communist Student Group' published a declaration claiming victory, in which they rightly argued that once the workers had left the struggle, the occupation as a political means of struggle was over: <https://www.newschoolinexile.org/2018/05/16/communist-students-declare-victory-new-school-occupation/>

However, additional contradictions existed between the initial Maoist leadership of the struggle, other organized political forces that supported it like anarchists and left-reformists, and the 'rank-and-file' of the struggle. Essentially, the activists were unable to unify behind a political program, especially after the economic demands were shifted to the negotiating table between the administration and union representatives. In the last days of the occupation, demands were made to involve 'Marxian' economist Professor Richard Wolff and elected officials and to establish the cafeteria as an anticapitalist cooperative - a demand the Maoists rightly condemned as a utopian idea of 'transforming out of capitalism'.

Looking back, the occupation did win an important victory: Written concessions by the administration and university President David Van Zandt to guarantee all food workers' jobs at the school with equal or better pay and benefits, to negotiate a contract until a final agreement was made that ensured benefits for the workers, and a clear recognition of UNITE HERE as the collective bargaining representative of the workers.

### Struggles and further results: The Strike

After over 8 months at the bargaining table and receiving few concessions, the academic student employees union SENS-UAW began organizing more direct actions on campus, including sit-ins, work-ins and a Mayday rally of several hundreds, that merged into the cafeteria occupation. The final stage of the escalation was a strike on May 8, threatening to go into the grading period, in which student employees play a pivotal role. For four days, SENS organized three picket lines with several hundred participants. Union members from other schools, the ongoing building trade struggle 'Count Me In!' and the food worker union UNITE HERE, showed their support on the picket lines. So did various left groups such as the Internationalist Group, the Spartacist League, Left Voice, Socialist Alternative, the Workers World Party and more. A Workers Power activist was on the strike's organizing committee.

The strike visibly disrupted university operations for the whole week. This was possible not only because of the long hours picketers put in, but also the strong messages of solidarity from both tenured and adjunct faculty members, student organizations, and union members in delivery services. However, classes and final exams were still being held, partially off-campus, and no academic strike was called. The union's demand was primarily to professors, not students, to call off classes.

Although the administration had threatened not to bargain during the strike, three sessions were eventually held, and smaller economic concessions were made. But, when it came to healthcare, the university side dug in their heels. Both the bargaining committee and UAW officials presented an evaluation of the situation that concluded that no acceptable contract would be attained by the end of the term.

They subsequently prepared to call off the strike on Friday, May 11.

However, in a debriefing session of picket captains and strike militants on that Friday, many activists called for an extension of the strike, and some even for an indefinite strike. The Bargaining Committee, BC, that by the rules of the preceding Strike Authorization Vote had the unilateral power both to call, and call off, a strike, agreed to a straw poll over the weekend to determine whether or not to continue the action. Eventually, the strike was called off on the Sunday, and the union engaged in smaller non-strike activities over graduation week.

### Opposition, Bureaucracy and Strategy

The results of this straw poll were never publicized under the pretense of not letting the university administration know the strength of the union. Thus we will not publish numbers or speculations over the result. But the overwhelming power of the BC against the views of many union activists is in itself a problem.

Although the BC members are elected rank-and-file members of the union, their ability to disregard pressure from the membership, and their constant engagement with the administration under terms of confidentiality detaches them from their membership. Thus, even if calling off the strike was the right decision strategically, it sheds light on a problematic split between those who make such strategic decisions, and can push them through, and those who are not even involved in these discussions, but have to implement decisions on the ground. In the light of the escalating contradictions between the administration and the workers, the contradiction between membership and officials of the union become most visible, too.

If this degenerates into the usual division between very active, but non-accountable officials, and a detached membership, it breaks the power of the union and of workers on campus in general. However, there is enough time and space for the union members to establish control over their union, and subsequently, over their workplace. The struggles at the moment, and the forced break over the summer, provide an excellent opportunity to lay the cornerstone for workers' power on campus and beyond.

For that, communists and radicals in the union need to organize around both a political program and a strategy for the struggle. The fight for control of the structures and leadership in the struggle, an essentially political struggle, can only be won if one provides an actual strategy to win workers' economic struggles.

### Solidarity and Unity

There are two main lessons from the struggles at the New School. Firstly, even when fought on the broadest and most natural economic program, political questions rapidly emerge. Revolutionaries need to be able to provide answers to the workers both on how to take control of their union, and how to win struggles against the employers. Simple radicalism in words and demands does not win either contracts or, in the long run, settle debates over leadership and policy.

Secondly, all workers on campus have one visible common enemy. Especially when the administration attacked three groups of workers at once, the class line became extremely visible. It is the main task for revolutionaries in this situation and in the coming period to emphasize the fight for workers' power on the basis of a class struggle program. Not only to ensure victory in the political battles, but also because this provides the key to winning the economic battle at hand.

For this we need to find common forms of struggle involving as many workers as possible, ones that relate to the state of class consciousness among them. The tradition of the US labor movement and the symbolic importance of picket lines are one entry point here ? others must be practical solidarity and open political debate among workers. The graduate employees and the student radicals must not let the bourgeois propaganda, that they are somehow detached from the working class because of the longer education they ?enjoyed?, win out.

We are one class, we have one enemy, and for once, we are fighting a single fight.

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