

October 20, 2023

Dear Provost Mitchell,

We are writing to share our concern about the lack of progress in bargaining between the university and CPW-UAW, the union representing our postdoctoral scholars. As you are undoubtedly aware, the union's contract expired this past June, and yet four months on, there remain critical, unaddressed issues that the union has raised with the University as it seeks a new contract. Our understanding is that you are not currently directly involved in bargaining with CPW-UAW, and we are very concerned that those representing the University at the bargaining table are far less appreciative than you of the fundamental role that postdoctoral scholars play in realizing the University's collective research, mentoring, teaching, and public-outreach ambitions.

First and foremost, we strongly support the union's demands for better compensation and benefits for its members. We are particularly concerned about the University's postdoctoral biomedical scientists. Since their pay is tied to the scale set by the NIH, they are not making a living wage in this city.<sup>1</sup> This has been recognized by NYU, which just raised the minimum salary for biomedical postdoctoral researchers 15%, to \$70,000 a year. We believe that similar adjustments to salaries, and investments in other important benefits (childcare and healthcare, to name the most obvious), are indispensable. Without such adjustments, current postdocs will continue to leave their positions, and Columbia will struggle to attract the best talent in the future.

In addition to NYU, several of our peer institutions (Harvard, UPenn, MIT, Princeton, and the University of California system, to name just a few) have recently increased their postdoctoral salaries and benefits, in the best case by directly injecting institutional funds, in the worst, by passing on the additional costs to principal investigators. It is our strong belief that until universities can band together to, for example, push the NIH to recognize the need for regional cost-of-living adjustments to its payscale,<sup>2</sup> Columbia should do all it can to cover these additional costs itself. The size of the average federal grant is not increasing significantly enough for individual principal investigators to make up the funding difference, particularly so long as inflation remains high.<sup>3</sup> Were we to place this burden on them, the future would likely be bleak: de facto flat grant budgets leading to fewer postdoctoral scientists in our labs and on our campus leading to a drop in our productivity across all of our activities.

Strikes are of course massively disruptive to the day-to-day business of the University, as we experienced just two years ago with our graduate students. But they also tear at the fabric of our community. We urge you and our colleagues representing the University in this negotiation to

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<sup>1</sup> The NIH payscale currently starts at \$56,484 for a first-year postdoctoral researcher and is still under \$65,000 per year five years post-PhD. The current minimum salary for a CPW-UAW member is \$60,000.

<sup>2</sup> The NIH established a working group a year ago to produce recommendations to better support postdocs. The group's report is due later this year and we hope it will include new guidance on salaries.

<sup>3</sup> In fact, the NIH data show that in constant dollars, the average grant amount is the same today as it was 10 years ago, and has barely changed since 1998. See <https://report.nih.gov/nihdatabook/report/155>

find a resolution that honors our collective efforts to build an equity-driven community in which the essential contributions of our postdoctoral scholars are recognized and celebrated.

Sincerely,

The Executive Committee of the Columbia chapter of the American Association of University Professors

David Lurie

Patricia Dailey

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<https://www.aaupcu.org/>