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# The Chief

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## A VOICE FOR WORKERS

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## Weill Cornell postdocs demand contract



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**Members of the Weill Cornell Medicine Postdocs Union-UAW rallied outside of Weill Cornell Medicine's Upper East Side campus as part of their fight for their first contract. The researchers say that WCM has rejected their requests for improved housing access and benefits to retain and protect immigrant workers.**

CRYSTAL LEWIS/THE CHIEF

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**BY CRYSTAL LEWIS**

Postdoctoral workers at Weill Cornell Medicine, who have been in negotiations for their first contract for nearly a year, demanded that the institution settle a contract that provides protections for immigrant workers and parents.

The researchers, who joined the United Auto Workers in November 2023, rallied outside of the Upper East Side campus along York Avenue Thursday. The workers said their demands for several basic policies — such as paid time off for visa renewals, a requirement for postdoctoral workers who have moved from other countries to work at Weill Cornell — have been rejected.

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“We are facing a critical issue, one that threatens our job security. The administration is pushing for a probationary period of three months, during which we could be terminated at-will,” said Maria Cecilia Lira, a postdoc in radiation oncology.

“Probation is a tool that allows discrimination to thrive,” she continued. “This policy opens the door to arbitrary termination that disproportionately harms international postdocs, women and other marginalized groups. With attacks on immigrants increasing under the Trump administration, the last thing we need is an additional layer of precarity placed on our shoulders.”

The postdocs are also seeking improvements to Weill Cornell’s housing policy. Krithika Karthigeyan, a third-year postdoc in pediatrics, noted that many postdocs were only told at the last minute that they wouldn’t have housing and had to scramble to find market-rate apartments.

“We know a lot of postdocs who have been left blindsided. We’re not even asking for guaranteed housing, just a more straightforward process,” she said. “WCM’s solution to insufficient housing is for postdocs to postpone their start date. Their solution is to place the onus on the postdocs.”

The university has also threatened to cut a shuttle that transports postdocs from their Roosevelt Island dorms to the Manhattan campus, the researchers said.

“With so many programs on the chopping block right now, we need real, tangible and sustainable change,” Caitlin Williams, a postdoc in pediatrics, said during the rally. “We’re here today to show them that the status quo is insufficient, and that we demand our fair share.”

Karthigeyan noted that the Weill-Cornell researchers had “the lowest postdocs wages in the country. [Weill Cornell is] accusing us of reaching for the ceiling when we’re not even at the floor.”

Weill Cornell did not immediately return a request for comment.

### A year of negotiations

Negotiations began for the nearly 480 postdocs’ first contract last March, according to Dagan Marx, a postdoctoral associate in biochemistry and a member of the Weill Cornell Medicine Postdocs Union’s bargaining committee. He noted that Cornell postdocs earned about \$12,000 less than other researchers in the city.

“Cornell’s game is that they want us to take the same salary as Mount Sinai, but accept the cuts,” he told The Chief following the rally.

The union is also seeking provisions that will help retain workers who have children.

“We want Cornell to provide some sort of childcare benefit. We’re asking for them to contribute to a DCFS account, which currently Cornell does not offer to postdoc employees,” said Marx, referring to a Dependent Care FSA that uses pre-tax money to pay for child care such as preschool.

“As a mother and postdoc at WCM, it’s clear to me that WCM’s resistance is contributing to a less equitable workplace,” added Laura Calvo Barreiro, a postdoc in radiology.

The workers emphasized that the protections were critical given the current threats to federal research funding.

Postdocs from other institutions — including at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, where postdocs won an agreement that provided 24-percent raises following a 12-day strike — also came out to support the Weill Cornell workers’ contract demands.

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