

Postdocs Demanding Better—Together

A successful unionization effort among Columbia University's postdoctoral researchers tackles bullying and financial disparities so that researchers can focus on science.

Postdoctoral researchers, who are both highly trained and strongly motivated, are indispensable to America's scientific workforce. With neither a faculty position nor guaranteed employment, the postdoc's charge is to produce: to undertake and disseminate laboratory and theoretical research that advances the state of the art, receive credit for doing so, and thereby earn the reward of a "real job." In today's research enterprise, the postdoc is ideally suited to the task of driving discovery and innovation.

Despite their centrality to research labs and national agendas, postdocs reside near the bottom of the hierarchy of scientific labor. Postdoctoral researchers—who have reached their terminal degree but not yet gotten a faculty position—go by a variety of titles depending on their field, institution, and funding mechanism: postdoctoral scientist, postdoctoral fellow, or associate research scientist, to name a few. In particular, so-called postdoctoral fellows, who are considered independent contractors, are grossly undercompensated—often receiving less than the starting salary for National Institutes of Health (NIH) postdocs, which many institutions use as a baseline: about \$55,000 per year. Because postdoctoral fellows are, by definition, supported by grant funding independent of the institutions where they work, they are not treated as university employees. As a result, they miss out on health, retirement, and payroll tax benefits available to institutional employees. And even though some positions, such as associate research scientists, are considered employees

with benefits, they may still be subject to the kinds of bullying, harassment, and workplace burnout that continue to prevail in academic STEM culture.

The inequities of being a postdoc might be tolerable if there were in fact a real job waiting on the other side, but the supply of applicants far outstrips demand for faculty. Research on labor outcomes varies, but one representative study found that less than a fifth of postdocs eventually obtain a tenure-track faculty position in a college or university.

As a consequence, scientists increasingly forego the academic path and pursue industry jobs after completing their PhDs. The flight to industry puts badly needed cash in scientists' pockets, but it also means that academic laboratories struggle to attract talent. The result is that university and national labs, engines of research and development, now face a hiring crisis.

Some science policy leaders have taken notice. Marcia McNutt, the president of the National Academy of Sciences, has called for better postdoc pay. An NIH advisory panel recently recommended the same. States are beginning to mandate higher salaries—albeit without funding those mandates—and a smattering of well-resourced universities have elected to provide health benefits and salaries that, while still low, exceed NIH's current minimum. Major science media outlets, such as the journal *Nature*, routinely publish articles about the challenges affecting postdocs and the institutions relying on them.

At Columbia University, where I am an associate research scientist in a neuroscience lab, postdocs and other nonfaculty researchers understand these struggles because we face them ourselves. We have responded by demanding better—together. The Union for Postdocs and Associate Researchers at Columbia, CPW-UAW 4100, was established in 2018 and negotiated its first collective bargaining agreement with the university in 2020. I am a head steward in joint council 3, an elected position that represents Columbia within our amalgamated local with postdocs at Mount Sinai. In 2023, we secured additional guarantees through a second round of bargaining.

We approached our negotiations as scientists. We gathered evidence through focus groups, town halls, research into competing institutions, and, critically, surveys. Our 2021 survey of 239 Columbia postdocs and associate researchers provided especially valuable results by revealing specific, persistent struggles and pointing to their root causes. For instance, the survey demonstrated serious power imbalances vis-à-vis faculty and administrators, on whom postdocs and associates rely for job recommendations and renewals of their temporary contracts. Our data also made

workplace. Our survey provides strong evidence: More than two-thirds (69%) of respondents reported having experienced at least one form of power-based harassment.

The most commonly reported experiences included receiving belittling, humiliating, or malicious remarks from a superior (40%); being saddled with unreasonable workloads (41%); and having appropriate credit for work contributions withheld (45%). Women reported more incidents than men did; rates of harassment and bullying were also higher among members of the LGBTQ+ community. International scholars did not report more incidents than US citizens did, but they expressed greater reticence to seek redress for fear of repercussions tied to their visa status.

It is worth dwelling for a moment on visa concerns, as these are significant sources of postdocs' and associates' difficulties. Immigration status is a major challenge for postdocs, even in the absence of coercion within their labs or institutions. Typically, an international worker will have a J-1 or an H1-B visa, both of which must be renewed repeatedly—annually, in many cases. This costly and onerous process involves substantial fees (charged to the worker), disruptions to research, and lost vacation time, as applicants

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clear that another key factor underlying both bullying and burnout is nationality. More than half of postdocs in the United States are temporary visa holders whose immigration status can be exploited. At Columbia, survey takers indicated in large numbers that they did not feel comfortable refusing unreasonable workplace demands lest they jeopardize their relationships with their visa sponsors.

Our data were crucial in winning support from institutional administrators. Our union's research demonstrated that more had to be done to support postdocs, and ultimately the university agreed. The union and university are now collaborators in pursuing shared objectives.

I do not mean to suggest that the negotiating table was always a happy place. There were tensions and disagreements. But our union, and Columbia, achieved a great deal, and I believe our story can be an inspiration.

The plight of the postdoc

Few would deny that postdocs and associates are underpaid, but less obvious even to science administrators is that postdocs and associates are routinely mistreated in the

may be required to seek renewal while outside the United States. Many postdocs and associates would prefer an H1-B visa, which more easily leads to permanent residency relative to the J-1. But H1-B visas are more expensive to obtain and are guarded behind dense thickets of red tape. To secure one, a sponsor—usually the principal investigator (PI) who is the worker's boss—must produce detailed, complex paperwork. As a result, it is not unusual for PIs to discourage H1-B applications, contributing to the precarity postdocs and associates experience.

Because visa renewal depends on sponsorship, visas become vectors for exploitation. As a steward in the union at Columbia, I've supported workers hesitant to report discrimination or harassment for fear of losing their visas. Visas also tie victims to perpetrators. Switching labs or institutions often requires months of legal processing and, again, the worker may be forced to leave the country while awaiting approval. Exiting the hostile environment becomes its own burden. And it is especially difficult for those from places, such as Middle Eastern or Asian countries, whose nationals face special restrictions when trying to work in the United States.

Our survey data also highlighted major challenges in the areas of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA). Workers described facing hurdles in self-identification, as institutional paperwork often lacks inclusive categories for gender, racial, and national identities. Survey takers also expressed dissatisfaction with antiracism and antidiscrimination training, highlighted their struggles with microaggressions, and lamented the absence of a pervasive culture of antiracism at the university. Many said they felt discouraged from participating in DEIA initiatives due to a sense that the community dismisses such endeavors as a waste of time. Respondents also expressed dissatisfaction with redress in cases of harassment and bullying, whether pursued through Title IX and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act or through other institutional complaint mechanisms.

Finally, our survey confirmed that fellows in particular were dissatisfied with their employment status, with nearly 60% expressing discontent. Some said that they were not told up front they would be paid as independent contractors. Many bemoaned the university's refusal to provide retirement contributions, parental leave, and health benefits.

These financial burdens are particularly challenging for young scientists from financially disadvantaged backgrounds, for whom fellowships are often the best route into academia. In theory, a PI *could* hire the same young scientists as non-fellow postdocs or associates—but frequently this is not a realistic option. Early-career PIs, for instance, usually have less grant money to pass around and so are reliant on fellows, and even a PI with large grants to draw on may need to economize. So the disadvantages of the system can stack up, leaving some postdocs in highly precarious situations, while others may have more security.

The survey also revealed that more senior associates and non-fellows are not necessarily doing well for themselves, either. Our data indicated that employees who had been with the institution for a longer time, perhaps moving from one postdoc position to another, were more likely to have experienced harassment. These workers are appointed year by year; with their jobs constantly on the chopping block, they experience heightened vulnerability to exploitation and coercion.

Bargaining for better

In extensive discussions with university administrators, our union leveraged the survey data to advocate for improvements. We also brought to bear the insights we gained from worker town halls, in which union members shared their experiences and observations about the conditions they face. The insights provided by these conversations guided union representatives in crafting proposed contract language and making our case at the negotiating table.

One of our key successes in the 2023 negotiations lay in addressing the concerns of postdoctoral fellows. New contract

language ensures that fellows have the opportunity to discuss what it means to transition from employee status to independent contractor, possibly losing access to standard employee benefits, including retirement contributions and childcare. In these cases, our negotiated contract ensures that fellows receive an additional stipend, at least partially compensating them for the financial disadvantages of their contractor status.

Salary-wise, the 2023 agreement built on gains the union achieved in its first round of bargaining. Before unionization in 2018, Columbia had no minimum salary, with the NIH minimum—around \$47,000 per year, at the time—serving as a guideline. This guideline, however, did not apply to fellows, who would receive whatever amount was set by their fellowship. In our first round of bargaining, in 2020, the union achieved a minimum salary of \$60,000 per year for all postdocs and \$66,100 per year for associates. In 2023, we negotiated these numbers upward to \$70,000 and \$77,000 per year, respectively, with annual increases now stipulated in our contract. These minimums not only reduce financial hardship—although it must be noted that in Manhattan, where Columbia is located, even \$77,000 per year does not go far—they also help to ensure salary equity for new hires.

Where a fellowship provides a salary below the university minimum, the PI is now required to supply the difference from their grants. In the future, our union would like to see the university itself providing for these shortfalls, at least in part. From a diversity perspective, it is important that the institution supports fellows, so that young PIs have more opportunity to retain talent, and scientists from underserved communities have a better chance to thrive in the research environment.

The 2023 talks produced several other major gains for postdocs and associates of all types. These workers now have access to \$5,000 a year in childcare assistance. The university also agreed to provide workers up to \$5,000 each in hardship funds to cover unexpected expenses. New hires are given a \$1,200 stipend to defray relocation costs. And the latest contract ensures funds for costs associated with visa renewals, lightening international workers' financial burden.

During negotiations over problems of bullying and harassment, the university initially hesitated to include protections in the collective bargaining agreement. Administrators argued that these matters could be handled through existing complaint procedures established without union input. Union negotiators argued that the system built around Title IX and Title VI is cumbersome and expensive. It is designed to respond only in cases of sexual harassment and racial and gender discrimination—not the wider universe of power-based harassment. And it is slow, failing to provide the timely relief that workers need in order to escape misconduct that is actively threatening their careers and mental health.

In response, union negotiators pressed for the creation of internal procedures that can provide remedies quickly, in the absence of formal legal proceedings or while such proceedings are underway. Although the new collective bargaining agreement doesn't specify these procedures, Columbia agreed to form a university-wide antibullying committee, which includes members from our union, that now oversees the creation of an Office of Conflict Resolution that will respond to misconduct complaints.

This office, proposed by the union, has the potential to address harassment claims more flexibly and more nimbly than formal Title IX or Title VI processes can on their own. An internal conflict-resolution system can, for example, quickly arrange alternative workspaces or supervisors for workers affected by misconduct, allowing them to continue their research. Such an approach is also advantageous to the institution because it can provide enhanced confidentiality. Formal procedures are technically confidential, but initiation legal procedures and paperwork is often impossible to keep under wraps. Future procedures, internal to an Office of Conflict Resolution, have the potential to reduce disclosure.

Our survey respondents also articulated a need for better mentorship and leadership training for people in supervisory

step, empowering workers to invest in DEIA goals.

What the union hasn't accomplish thus far, we may yet. And we will be better positioned to argue our case in the future. CPW-UAW 4100's Diversity Working Group learned a great deal about equity and inclusion while researching and developing the union's proposals. As a voice for underrepresented groups within the union, the working group also reinforced our commitment to advancing DEIA goals. The foundations for further change have been laid.

Toward a productive future for research

Our efforts have not only improved conditions for postdoctoral workers at Columbia—they have also served as a blueprint for similar gains at other institutions. Our work directly inspired significant achievements for postdocs at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, whose union secured strong protections, including the highest minimum salary in the country and housing support.

Postdoc unionization is gaining momentum. Mount Sinai and Columbia postdocs recently amalgamated our unions, and we look forward to welcoming workers from Cornell, the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, and Rockefeller University, which are all currently bargaining

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roles, emphasizing the importance of consequences for perpetrators in order to deter misconduct. The collected data were reviewed by the university's antibullying committee and became the basis of draft guidelines that were ultimately included in our contract; they are now in the process of being applied to all workers at Columbia. The 2023 contract also empowers union workers to seek out better mentorship by working with a wider range of faculty. Under new co-mentorship provisions of the contract, postdocs and associates can receive career support from a faculty member who is not their supervisor.

The union proposed a number of improvements to address DEIA concerns. We advocated for required training to ensure that faculty and staff are prepared to interview aspiring postdocs from diverse backgrounds and to mitigate bias during the hiring process. We also recommended establishing enhanced DEIA offices within departments and the adoption of gender-neutral language for official forms and communications. The university and the union were unable to reach consensus on these reforms, but the university did agree to join the union in promoting DEIA efforts through an official union-management Diversity Working Group. This is an important

for substantial improvements. To support these campaigns, Columbia and Mount Sinai postdocs have organized bargaining retreats, where we share strategies for successful negotiations. Eventually, we hope our coalition will become a citywide union, empowering postdocs across New York to advocate for fair treatment and compensation.

By strengthening collaborations between postdocs and institutions, unions are not just improving work conditions. We are enhancing the foundation of scientific research itself; paving the way for greater innovation and discovery. By reshaping the postdoc experience, unions are enabling researchers to focus more on their work and less on financial survival and dealing with bullies and discrimination. These are, after all, unions of scholars. Our members want to be deeply engaged in research, and to make meaningful contributions—goals that are more achievable without the constant worry of making ends meet.

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