

Harvard concedes main demands of dining hall workers to end strike

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After three weeks on strike, Harvard University Dining Service (HUDS) workers returned to work last week with a new contract that appears to satisfy the main issues of health care and wages that prompted the strike. The agreement was ratified in a 537-1 vote Wednesday by members of UNITE HERE Local 26, which represents the workers, concluding the 22-day strike that was the first for the workers since 1983.

The strike had won significant support from both students and faculty at the Harvard campus in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Following the announcement of the strike on September 17, more than a dozen student organizations at Harvard Law School released a statement supporting the action. More than 3,000 students signed a petition started by the undergraduate Students Labor Action Movement in support of the workers' demands.

A number of organizations endorsed the strike including Harvard's Undergraduate Council, the Law School Student Government, the Kennedy School Student Government, and the editorial board of the *Crimson*, the student newspaper. Even the *Boston Globe* published official endorsements of the strike and both the Boston and Cambridge City Councils passed resolutions of support.

Students rejected calls by the Harvard administration for student employees to cross the picket line and scab on the HUDS workers and instead joined the picket lines and organized class walkouts and occupations in support. Students at Harvard College and other graduate programs flooded the voicemail inboxes of the 13 fellows who sit on the board of Harvard Corporation with messages of support for the HUDS workers.

According to UNITE HERE Local 26, the union representing HUDS, employees would not see an increase to their out-of-pocket health care costs with the

contract, which will last five years. Local 26 President Brian Lang told a crowd gathered at the First Parish Church as voting took place, "we have achieved every goal without exception, with no concessions to Harvard."

A Diversity and Equality Committee will also be created to "address concerns regarding diversity and equal treatment of Harvard dining hall employees," according to a Local 26 press release.

While the new contract appears to satisfy the main demands of the union, these demands were based on maintaining the status quo on health benefits and obtaining minimal wage increases. Under the new contract workers' earnings remain barely above poverty level in a metropolitan area where rents and other living costs are far above the national average.

Harvard had demanded huge increases in both health care premiums and out-of-pocket costs. The proposal by Harvard would have required a worker earning \$30,000 a year to contribute a premium of \$233 a month in addition to co-pays, deductibles and out-of-pocket costs. This amounts exceeds what can be found on the Massachusetts Health Connector, the state's version of Obamacare.

Harvard eventually backed down, agreeing to cover copayments as workers are moved to a new health plan, beginning in 2019. The costs will be covered by a flexible savings account paid for by Harvard. While the university made a significant concession in agreeing to cover the higher costs, Harvard achieved the goal of shifting workers onto the new plan, opening the way for imposing these out-of-pocket costs fully onto workers in the future.

The deal gives full-time workers a guaranteed annual income of \$35,000, but the wage increases are minimal: 2.5 percent per year. The remainder of the increased

income is in the form of a stipend for the period when dining halls are closed during for the summer and winter breaks.

Under the new contract full-time workers will receive an annual \$2,400 stipend, rising to \$3,000 in 2020. The stipend amounts to about \$185 per week for 13 weeks, far less than the \$800 per week workers earn during the academic year. For employees who work fewer hours during the academic year, the stipend will be “prorated,” meaning it will be adjusted in relation to the number of hours an employee works. Only full-time employees who are available to work throughout the year will make \$35,000 a year.

At some other universities such as Yale dining workers belong to the same union as workers in other trades and are able to work year-round. Many on the picket lines were hoping for a similar agreement with Harvard.

According to the MIT living wage calculator, \$35,000 for a full-time worker translates to less than \$17 an hour based on the 2080 hours in a year that characterizes full-time work. This is barely above the minimum living wage for one adult of \$13.34 and below that for one adult, plus child, at \$27.49.

University spokesperson Tania DeLuzuriaga wrote in a statement that the union agreed to changes in retiree health benefits that “will make their insurance plan consistent with all of Harvard’s exempt employees and 5,000 members of other unions on campus.” It is unclear what these changes are.

According to the Human Resources site, the 2016 costs for health insurance range between \$91 and \$135 for an individual and \$246 and \$364 for a family in the lowest tier, set at earnings of less than \$70,000 a year. Harvard has said it will create a new premium contribution tier for employees who make less than \$55,000 per year, in which the university will contribute 87 percent of the cost of the lowest-cost plan, but this won’t be implemented until 2019.

As Harvard returns to business as usual, contract negotiations for dining hall workers at Northeastern University in Boston, also organizing in Local 26, are expected to begin soon. Janitors at nearby Tufts University voted Thursday to authorize a strike if a new contract agreement isn’t reached with the school’s maintenance contractor by October 31. Some 200 workers who clean the university voted unanimously

for a strike.

The janitors work for a building services provider for commercial and industrial properties, Newton-based C&W Services. According to Local 32BJ of the Services Employees International Union, which represents the workers, demands are similar to those raised in the HUDS strike—cost-of-living wage increases, opportunities for more full-time jobs and affordable health care benefits.



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