

Unions, aided by the pseudo-left, push through poverty-level wage deals

Lessons of the Harvard University Dining Services strike

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Dining service workers at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, voted to end their three-week strike over pay and health benefits in late October. The contract for 700 Harvard University Dining Services (HUDS) was negotiated and pushed through by Local 26 of UNITE HERE with the assistance of the pro-Stalinist Workers World Party (WWP), whose supporters held leading positions in the union.

The HUDS deal was declared a total victory by the Local 26 leadership and their pseudo-left apologists, but leaves workers earning barely above the poverty level in a metropolitan area with rents and other living costs far above the national average.

The union negotiated summer stipends that would put full-time workers only at an income of \$35,000 per year. The many part-time HUDS workers fared even worse. Throughout the secret negotiations with Harvard, the union restricted the demands of the strike to maintaining the status quo on health care along with minimal pay increases. Harvard agreed to cover out-of-pocket costs incurred with the transfer to a new health care plan, but left the door open for withdrawing these subsidies in the future.

Just last week, janitors at Harvard University also voted 430-105 in favor of ratifying a new four-year contract. The contract was reached in last-minute talks between the university and Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 32BJ, which negotiates labor agreements covering some 700 custodians who maintain buildings throughout Harvard campuses in Cambridge and Boston.

The janitors had voted overwhelming on November 10 to authorize a strike if no agreement was reached by Tuesday, November 15, but negotiations continued early into Wednesday morning as the deadline passed. The settlement reached between union negotiators and Harvard is the latest in a string of poverty-wage deals negotiated for some of the lowest paid workers in the state.

According to the Local 32BJ web site, the deal provides a 12.5 percent increase in wages over four years and secures employer-paid health care. Under the union's previous contract, SEIU workers did not receive their benefits directly from Harvard but from a fund SEIU maintains, to which the university contributes. Janitors will make just \$24.67 an hour by the end of the new contract. The union claims "these jobs remain strong jobs, with good wages and benefits that create an entry into the middle class."

In reality, these "strong jobs" pay below the minimum living wage for an adult with one child. The MIT Living Wage calculator puts this at \$26.87 an hour, above what the janitors will be making even by the end of the four-year contract.

Since 1990, the cost of living in the Boston area has increased by 68 percent, placing it in the top 10 most expensive cities to live in the US.

According to the Expatistan cost of living index, Boston ranks at number six, behind New York City, San Francisco, Washington, DC, Honolulu and San Jose, California. A recent article on bostonmagazine.com put the Boston area cost of living at 39.7 percent above the US average.

In the HUDS strike, the primary concern of the unions and their pseudo-left supporters was to bolster the Democratic Party and the presidential campaign of Hillary Clinton at the expense of obtaining a livable wage and decent conditions for workers. This effort was supported by sections of the media and political establishment. Just two days before the end of the strike, the *Boston Globe* ran an editorial supporting the strike and calling on Harvard to settle the workers' demands.

The same day, the *New York Times* ran an op-ed article by Rosa Ines Rivera, a cook in the Harvard dining halls who has worked there for 17 years. Earlier, the Boston City Council unanimously passed a resolution supporting the strike, and the City of Cambridge, where Harvard is located, had done so in September before the strike began.

Nationally, UNITE HERE supported the Clinton campaign. In a July 19 statement, the union described Clinton as "a staunch advocate for immigrant families" although she supports Obama, who deported more immigrants than his Republican predecessor. The New England Joint Board (NEJB) of UNITE HERE voted to support "Bernie's [Sanders] call for a political revolution," which was a vehicle for keeping workers tied to the Democratic Party, as shown by the Vermont senator's craven support for Clinton following his defeat in the primaries. The SEIU nationally endorsed Clinton, as did Local 32BJ.

At the end of October, SEIU Local 32BJ also struck a deal with the contract company for workers who clean Tufts University just two hours before a midnight deadline for a threatened strike. The *Boston Globe* reported, "About 200 Tufts janitors will see their hourly wages increase to \$21.55 from \$19.35 over the next four years, if the janitors ratify the contract. The workers' union also received a commitment from contractor C&W Services to create more full-time positions over the life of the contract."

Prior to the HUDS strike, in September, Local 32BJ averted a strike by more than 9,000 janitors who clean commercial office buildings in Greater Boston with a deal that gave a 12 percent pay raise over four years, putting those workers at just \$20 an hour by 2020. At the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the union reached a deal that will pay janitors less than \$24 an hour by 2019.

In addition, a number of potential strikes in the Boston area were averted as last-minute deals were struck between unions and management meeting in secret negotiations behind the backs of the membership. These included nurses at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston and janitors

who clean Boston's transit system, the MBTA.

The HUDS strike was one of many shut down by the unions across the country in the weeks leading up to the presidential election. Strikes by state university faculty members in Pennsylvania, Minnesota nurses, Libbey Glass workers in Ohio, and Jim Beam whiskey workers in Kentucky were all sabotaged by the unions.

These walkouts followed the strike by 40,000 Verizon telecom workers earlier in the year. The Verizon struggle was isolated and betrayed by the Communications Workers of America (CWA), which accepted a sellout agreement that imposed cuts in health care and left workers victimized for picket line infractions.

In Philadelphia, the Transport Workers Union (TWU) shut down a powerful six-day strike earlier this month in an effort to boost the vote for Clinton by ensuring that transit would be available for polling day. The deal provides a miserable pay raise of just 10.5 percent over five years, increases health care costs and ignores one of the central demands of workers regarding onerous work schedules that endanger both the workers and the riding public. The deal was pushed through with significant rank-and-file opposition.

The primary function of the trade unions over the last four decades has been to suppress the class struggle and maintain the political stranglehold of the Democratic Party. Under the Obama administration, the unions limited work stoppages to the lowest level since the end of World War II while collaborating with the Obama administration to slash wages (2009 GM and Chrysler restructuring), destroy public worker pensions (2013-2014 Detroit bankruptcy) and shift the cost of health care from employers to workers (Cadillac Tax on supposedly overgenerous health benefits for unionized workers).

The suppression of the class struggle, the endless promotion of economic nationalism and anti-foreigner chauvinism, and the alliance with the pro-corporate Democratic Party facilitated the greatest transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top in US history. The unions share responsibility, along with Clinton, Obama and Sanders, for the victory of the fascist Donald Trump in the 2016 election.

As the unions become ever more exposed as an agency of the banks and corporations, they rely increasingly on a layer of pseudo-left organizations who have found lucrative careers inside the union apparatus. The chief negotiator in the HUDS strike was Michael Kramer, a longtime supporter of the Workers World Party. WWP National Committee member Ed Childs is a Local 26 chief steward.

In addition to falsely declaring contract battles and strikes betrayed by the unions as "victories," the WWP specializes in presenting every manifestation of the class struggle in racial or gender terms. In a statement issued in the name of their presidential candidates, they claimed: "The [HUDS] strikers were inspired by the historic Black Lives Matter movement at Harvard last semester, when students won victories to abolish the racist 'house master' title and discard a law school coat of arms depicting its founder's slaves at work."

Their demands included the establishment in the collective bargaining agreement of a task force "to combat racism and discrimination in the kitchens." Regarding the HUDS contract, they "applaud UNITE HERE's groundbreaking language that will strengthen gender identity protections." The latter will no doubt provide new positions for "left" union functionaries.

The *Workers World* article reporting the end of the strike declares, "The HUDS strike was led by women—Latina, African American, Caribbean, Asian, Indigenous, white, LBGTQ—who make up more than 60 percent of the workforce."

Workers World claims that "the Harvard Corporation caved, literally overnight," granting "retroactive wage increases amounting to \$3 an hour over the five-year contract; a substantial, first-time-ever stipend during summer layoffs; better, less expensive health insurance, including for

retirees; increased uniform and shoe allowances; strengthened gender identity nondiscrimination terms; and union-power language that exceeded their initial demands."

In reality, the union restricted the workers' demands to the bare minimum and did everything they could to prevent the Harvard strike from linking up to a growing rebellion among lower-paid hourly workers throughout the region and nationally. At the same time, the tightly controlled struggles like the HUDS strike and others, such as the "Fight for \$15" campaign promoted by the SEIU, are aimed at shoring up the credibility of the unions and the Democratic Party and keeping workers from breaking their political stranglehold.

In the months leading up to the US elections, similar roles were played by the International Socialist Organization (ISO), whose member Jesse Sharkey serves as Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) vice president, and by Socialist Alternative, which was influential in the bargaining committee for the Minnesota Nurses Association.

In the former, the ISO-backed CTU blocked a strike by 35,000 teachers and collaborated with Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel to impose a deal that strips new teachers of pension benefits and paves the way for more layoffs and school closings. In the latter, the MNA/SA worked with Democratic Governor Mark Dayton to shut down the more than month-long strike by nearly 5,000 and impose a sellout deal containing precedent-setting health care concessions that rank-and-file nurses had repeatedly rejected. Predictably, the ISO and SA hailed both of these betrayals as great successes.

The working class must draw the lessons of these struggles. The official trade unions are not workers' organizations. They are organizations of upper middle class and increasing wealthy business executives who are tied to the Democratic Party and capitalism and only want a greater share from the exploitation of the workers they falsely claim to represent. These functionaries increasingly include those currently or formerly associated with "left" politics that want to maintain the stranglehold of these anti-working class organizations under conditions of growing militancy and opposition.

If workers in the unions and the tens of millions outside of the unions are to defend their interests, it will require the building of new organizations of struggle, democratically controlled by the rank and file and committed to the methods of the class struggle, not to what the corporate owners and political officials claim they can afford. The development of an industrial counter-offensive by workers must be combined with a new political strategy based on the political independence of the working class from the two big business parties and the fight for a socialist alternative to the capitalist profit system.



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