

# Harvard University grad students set to strike over pay, grievance procedures, healthcare

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Graduate students at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts are poised to strike Tuesday after last-minute negotiations between their union and university officials failed to reach an agreement. Some 2,500 of Harvard's more than 4,000 grad students voted in October to authorize a strike.

The Harvard Graduate Students Union–United Automobile Workers (HGWU-UAW) and the administration reportedly have not reached an agreement on sticking points in the agreement, including on pay packages and grievance procedures for sexual harassment complaints filed by graduate students.

Grad students at Harvard help teach classes, grade papers and work in research labs. Most classes are coming to the end for the term, but a strike could potentially cancel tutoring sessions for undergraduate students and delay the grading of tests and papers. The university has called on faculty to do the work of graduate students and scab on them in the event of a strike.

Forty-five members of the Class of 1969 sent a letter to Harvard President Lawrence S. Bacow on November 17, calling on him to improve pay and job security for graduate students and non-tenure-track faculty. According to their analysis, 65 percent of teachers at the university are not tenured or on the tenure track.

Provost Alan M. Garber has responded to grad students' demands, identifying that there are a number of "core issues" that remain outstanding in the negotiations. He said that allowing collective bargaining over "financial aid, grades, and assessment of academic achievement" is "unacceptable," because these are academic issues.

Specifically, the university's proposal would bar the union from negotiating over the terms of graduate student workers' stipends, which are the meager financial payments received by the grad students. HGWU-UAW wants compensation proposals to include provisions

covering the stipends.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the mean income of graduate teaching assistants is just \$36,390. By contrast, former Harvard President Drew G. Faust made just over \$1.7 million in compensation in 2017, her last full year as president. Current president Bacow's compensation will not be released until next year.

Harvard officials' hard line in relation to collective bargaining on the stipends is in line with a recent Trump administration labor board proposal that would curb the establishment of graduate student unions at private universities. The proposed US National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) rule would classify grad students as primarily having an educational rather than an economic relationship with their university employers.

The reality is that graduate students across the US are highly exploited workers. They serve as a low-paid labor workforce—teaching classes, performing research and other critical duties—that brings in lucrative grants and other resources.

Harvard's refusal to negotiate on the stipends or grant raises to graduate students has nothing to do with an inability to foot the bill. Harvard has the largest college endowment in the country. *Harvard Magazine* and the *Harvard Crimson* report that the fund's total value for the 2019 fiscal year is \$40.9 billion—a \$1.7 billion increase over the previous year. Of this massive endowment, Harvard committed only \$414 million toward student financial aid during the 2016-2017 academic year, or just over 1 percent of the endowment.

Harvard graduate students are certainly in need of a means to conduct a struggle against the university's attack on their rights and attempts to maintain them in servitude to the university. However, the UAW, to which the HGWU is affiliated, is not a legitimate instrument of workers' interests.

The UAW has earned the hatred of workers for its

decades-long collusion with the auto companies, which has resulted in a 50 percent pay cut in real wages since 1979 and the loss of hundreds of thousands of jobs. The president of the union just resigned, and dozens of top UAW officials have been indicted or implicated in illegal schemes, from taking company bribes in exchange for signing wage-cutting contracts to embezzling millions in union assets.

Most recently, the UAW betrayed the 40-day strike by General Motors workers and signed contracts at GM, Ford and Fiat Chrysler that will vastly expand the number of temporary workers who have no rights but are still forced to pay union dues.

The only interest the UAW and unions such as the American Federation of Teachers have in organizing university workers at Harvard and elsewhere is to bolster their dues income and shrinking membership after decades of collaborating in the destruction of jobs and working conditions of auto and other workers.

In November 2018, Columbia University graduate and postdoctoral students organized in the Graduate Workers of Columbia–UAW and the Columbia Post-Doctoral Workers–UAW entered into a “framework agreement” with the university as the “exclusive bargainers” for students. The university received a 14-month no-strike clause in exchange. The unions are more than willing to accept significant concessions in exchange for such “recognition.”

More recently, last March, 1,600 University of Illinois (UIC) graduate students walked out to demand decent pay and an end to student fees. The three-week strike was called off by the Graduate Employees Organization Local 6257, an affiliate of the Illinois Federation of Teachers, which signed a deal keeping salaries at a paltry \$18,140.

Speaking at a rally of grad students in Chicago outside the offices of the NLRB last month to protest the Trump administration’s proposed new rule was Jesse Sharkey, the president of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), who recently shut down and betrayed the 11-day strike by 25,000 teachers and support staff. The contract paves the way for a new round of school closings by the Democratic administration of Mayor Lori Lightfoot.

The natural allies of graduate students at Harvard and elsewhere are the teachers in Chicago, Boston and school districts across the country who have come into struggle in recent years against the poverty wages being imposed on teachers, which are impacting students in the form of deteriorating conditions in the schools.

But the UAW and union bureaucrats like Sharkey, a

former member of the International Socialist Organization and current member of the Democratic Socialists of America, seek to peddle illusions that the Democratic Party, a party of Wall Street and the Pentagon, can be pressured to act in workers’ interests.

To win their struggle, Harvard students need organizations that will fight for their social and democratic rights. But such organizations must be democratically controlled rank-and-file committees and be completely independent of the pro-capitalist and nationalist trade unions.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality calls on grad students to form rank-and-file strike committees, which are based on the fight to win what students and their families need, not what the corporate and financial elite and their political front men claim is affordable. These committees should link up the fight for the rights of grad students with the struggle to cancel student debt and guarantee the right to high-quality public and higher education for all, regardless of socioeconomic background.

Rank-and-file strike committees should reach out to the thousands of transit and other public employees in Boston who are fighting the Democratic Party’s austerity measures and the millions of other workers around the country and the world fighting the grotesque levels of social inequality created by the capitalist system.

The fight for improvements in living standards and working conditions for grad students is not a trade union but, above all, a political issue. Its building of rank-and-file workplace and factory committees must be combined with the building of a mass political movement of the working class, which is independent of both corporate-controlled parties and fights for the socialist reorganization of economic life to meet human needs, instead of private profit.

We urge grad students who agree with this fight to contact the International Youth and Students for Social Equality today.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**