

Harvard University graduate student union begins strike over pay, conditions

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Graduate students at Harvard University began strike action on Tuesday after negotiations between their union and the administration failed to reach an agreement on Monday. Several hundred members of the Harvard Graduate Students Union–United Automobile Workers (HGSU-UAW) began picketing at 10 a.m. in Harvard Yard in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Some 2,500 of the university’s more than 4,000 grad students voted in October to authorize a strike.

After more than a year of negotiations, and 28 bargaining sessions, the two sides have failed to come to an agreement on key issues, including healthcare, compensation and sexual harassment and discrimination grievance procedures. HGSU-UAW members include teaching fellows, course assistants and graduate research assistants.

Participating union members will stop their paid instructional work, including maintaining office hours and grading assignments and exams. Striking research assistants will withhold 20 hours of paid research work not related to their personal academic program.

During the last bargaining session Monday, the union offered sizeable concessions to the university. On wages, HGSU is now asking for a 5 percent wage increase this year and 3.5 percent in each subsequent years of the contract, down from its previous demand of a 4.25 percent annual wage increase for salaried research assistants and hourly workers, and a 5 percent annual increase for salaried teaching staff.

HGSU also reduced its demand on minimum wages for grad student workers. The union had previously asked for \$28 to \$34 per hour, depending on academic discipline, but is now asking for only \$25 per hour, or 5 percent above the current rate for all workers.

Union negotiators also significantly altered proposals on dental and healthcare coverage for members’ adult dependents. HGSU also changed its threshold for

members to be eligible for benefits from about seven hours per week to “an average of 17.5 hours/week” in a semester. Proposals for retirement and professional development benefits were also withdrawn.

Despite the union’s concessions on virtually all provisions of the contract, the administration has remained intransigent. The university has indicated that no additional bargaining sessions have been scheduled, according to Harvard spokesman Jonathan L. Swain. Swain wrote in an email Monday that the university believes that a strike is “unwarranted.”

The grad student strikers have the support of many undergraduates. Benten Niggel came to the picket Tuesday. “I’m a freshman and I support the strikers,” he said. “They’re fighting for a contract and I know they’ve been in negotiations for over a year and a half. As much as it’s affecting me—because my essays will not be getting graded, and we don’t know how it will get done—it’s really important that they’re out here exercising their rights. It’s not like this is a rash decision.

“At a college like Harvard, where our endowment is \$40 billion, they’re having to strike because their wages aren’t high enough. It’s not like we don’t have the money to afford it, especially when tenured professors are making upwards of \$200,000, and the president himself makes at least a six-figure salary. I think Harvard is notorious for being stubborn. With the [dining hall] strike that happened three years ago, it took months before they came to a deal.”

Despite the determination of grad students to fight to improve their wages and working conditions, the HGSU-UAW has made only token appeals to other sections of workers at Harvard. The union has indicated that their picket lines are “porous”—i.e., strikers will not block people from entering buildings.

The Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers, the largest union at the university, has instructed its

members to decline to do work that would “normally be done” by student workers. Roxana Rivera, vice president of custodial and security union 32BJ SEIU, wrote in an emailed statement that her union “stands with” student workers, but has proposed no action in solidarity.

Striker Cherrie Bucknor spoke to the WSWS on the picket line Tuesday. “The main issues are affordable and comprehensive healthcare,” she said. “We want real protection against sexual harassment. We want a living predictable wage.

“The administration think that they can hide behind closed doors, and behind the good name of Harvard and the good reputation of Harvard. But we as student workers know that we aren’t treated fairly.

“We know that we are dealing with a mental health crisis on campus, and that the administration is not doing anything about it. We’ve had a number of surveys go out, and we know that an overwhelming number of grad students are affected. This is true in academia in general, but at Harvard it’s particularly a problem.”

She commented on the university’s claim that their stipends are not a negotiable issue:

“They’re trying to act like part of our pay as teaching assistants in particular is ‘financial aid.’ We completely disagree with that assessment of the facts. Our pay is for our work as teaching assistants. They shouldn’t be allowed to pay us lower wages just because they want to tie our wages to what they pay the adjuncts here. They deserve more pay; we deserve more pay.”

Cherrie said she had been following the wave of teachers strike. She said, “Teachers in general, not just teaching assistants—teachers in Chicago, teachers in Kentucky, teachers in Florida, teachers everywhere—we’re not respected as teachers. Our work is not respected. And we’re expected to put in so many hours in not good conditions in order to educate the future of America, and we’re not really treated the way we should be treated.”

While teachers across the country are indeed the natural allies of grad students, the UAW and teachers unions like the American Federation of Teachers have done nothing to link up the struggles of all educators. Instead, the UAW, AFT and other unions promote the lie that the big-business Democratic Party can be pressured to act in workers’ interests.

Democratic presidential candidates Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren have both made hollow

statements of support for the grad student workers, which should be dismissed by grad students with contempt. Both Sanders and Warren have appeared for photo-ops on picket lines—during the recent UAW strike against General Motors and during the Stop & Shop strike of supermarket workers earlier this year in New England—only to remain silent as these workers’ struggles were subsequently betrayed.

Harvard graduate students need a strategy to defend their rights and fight for improved wages and conditions, but the UAW, to which the HGSU is affiliated, offers no way forward. The union is currently mired in a corruption scandal that recently forced the resignation of its president, Gary Jones, who is implicated in the theft of hundreds of thousands of dollars in members’ dues money. Most recently, the UAW betrayed the 40-day strike by GM workers and signed contracts at GM and Ford that expand the number of temporary workers who have no rights but are still forced to pay union dues.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality calls on grad students to form rank-and-file strike committees, independent of the unions, to link up their fight for their rights and wages with the struggle to cancel student debt and guarantee the right to high-quality public and higher education for all.

These committees should reach out to other Harvard workers and to teachers, transit, tech and other workers in the Greater Boston area to lead a political fight against austerity, the collapse of vital infrastructure and the subordination of universities and research institutes to the US police-military apparatus.

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:

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