

Harvard University retaliates against striking graduate students

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7 December 2019

The administration of Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts has begun to retaliate against the strike by graduate students, which began on Tuesday. Members of the Harvard Graduate Students Union–United Automobile Workers (HGSU–UAW) struck on both the Cambridge and Longwood campuses of the Ivy League school after more than a year of negotiations and 28 bargaining sessions failed to reach an agreement.

The strike has already caused the cancellation of some tutoring sessions for undergraduate students and delays in the grading of tests and papers. UPS drivers organized in Teamsters Local 25 have refused to cross picket lines to deliver packages.

Grad students help teach classes, grade papers and work in research labs. The university had called on faculty to do the work of graduate students and scab on them in the event of a strike. If the strike continues, it could disrupt exams, which begin December 10.

In an attempt at intimidation, several academic departments emailed graduate student teaching staff asking whether they are participating in the strike, prompting anger among striking union members and faculty.

The memo, which was originally sent to Government Department affiliates by Chair Jeffrey A. Frieden, informed graduate students that they are responsible for reporting whether they are working and that those who strike should not expect to be paid. University faculty were also reminded that they are “management” and are responsible for their “instructional responsibilities.”

In a statement, Frieden wrote that he has “emailed all graduate students who are serving as Teaching Fellows to ask if they are working,” and to inform them that “We are collecting that information, as requested by the administration.” Other departments in the Faculty of

Arts and Sciences later sent out similar memos to their graduate students and faculty.

“Please respond to this email to confirm whether or not you intend to fulfill your responsibilities as a Teaching Fellow,” reads a segment included in some emails from administrators at Harvard Divinity School, the Physics Department and the African and African American Studies departments. “Please note that by not responding to this message, you are confirming your decision to strike.”

Administrators from other departments, including the Classics, Celtic Languages and Literatures, Astronomy, Comparative Literature, East Asian Languages and Civilizations, and Germanic Languages and Literatures departments, declined to send similar emails to students.

Harvard faculty have spoken out in defense of the grad students and against the university’s intimidation tactics. Bart Bonikowski, associate professor of sociology, wrote on Facebook: “Just to be clear, like many other faculty I know, I support the @hgsuuaw strike, refuse to report any information about students’ strike participation to the administration, and won’t be holding any meetings or classes on campus until the strike is over. Solidarity!”

Dozens of faculty members have also signed a statement in support of the striking grad students. However, the strike has been ineffective at mobilizing anything but moral support from other unions on the campus. HGSU–UAW has made it clear that its picket lines are “porous” and that students, faculty and other campus workers will not be blocked from entering university buildings.

On Friday, HGSU–UAW was officially chartered as Local 5118, Region 9A of the United Auto Workers. The Harvard grad students, like grad students at

universities across the country, both private and public, are determined to fight for higher wages, decent working conditions and improved benefits. But the record of the UAW proves that it is not the instrument of struggle they need to win their fight.

Most recently, the UAW betrayed the 40-day strike by General Motors workers. It has 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 union is currently caught up in a corruption scandal that has led to guilty pleas by numerous officials and forced the resignation of the president, Gary Jones, who is implicated in the theft of hundreds of thousands of dollars in members' dues money.

The UAW, anxious to bolster its dues base, depleted by the destruction of hundreds of thousands of autoworkers' jobs as a result of its treacherous policies, has made a concerted effort to organize campus workers. Region 9A has organized locals at numerous Northeast campuses, including Columbia University, New York University, the University of Connecticut, the University of Massachusetts and The New School.

At Columbia in November 2018, 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. Columbia received a 14-month no-strike clause, while the students won only the “privilege” of being represented by the UAW and paying dues to the union bureaucracy.

On their own initiative, striking Harvard grad students have gained the support of UPS drivers. Strikers and their supporters have set up pickets at gates, loading docks and delivery centers. The strike has also disrupted BorrowDirect, a library borrowing service across US academic institutions. Some of BorrowDirect's deliveries rely on UPS.

To win their struggle, however, Harvard strikers and other student workers need organizations that will fight for their democratic and social rights. The pro-capitalist and nationalist trade unions such as the UAW have proven themselves incapable of carrying out such a struggle.

Rank-and-file strike committees should be built at Harvard to reach out to the thousands of transit workers, public employees, tech and research workers

and other campus workers in the Boston area and beyond.

The struggle for improvements in living standards and working conditions is above all a political issue and must be combined with the building of a mass political movement of the working class, independent of both big-business parties, the Democrats and Republicans.

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



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact