

Harvard University student workers overwhelmingly authorize strike

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11 October 2021

Student workers at Harvard University, members of the Harvard Graduate Students Union-United Auto Workers (HGSU-UAW), voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike in a vote that ended September 30, with 91.7 percent (1,860 members) voting in favor. The union says that 386 new student workers joined the union during the vote, which was only available to members. The last strike of Harvard graduate students lasted most of December 2019 but did not achieve strikers' demands.

In fact, since the union began negotiating with the administration in October 2018, Harvard has not made any significant concession to key demands from student workers regarding wages, benefits and working conditions.

The HGSU-UAW is calling for salary increases of 5.75 percent, 4.5 percent and 3 percent in the three years of an agreement, retroactive to July 1, 2021. It is also calling for a \$21-an-hour minimum wage for hourly student workers with \$0.50 increases in following years. Harvard University is proposing raises of 2.5, 3 and 3 percent, with a \$19 minimum wage for hourly workers followed by \$0.50 increases in the following two years.

Neither proposal meets the needs of student workers. Even if the union's proposal were adopted in full, which is highly unlikely, with inflation currently running at 5 percent annually, workers would be treading water and then experience falling wages in real terms.

The union does not mention once the COVID-19 pandemic and the dangers it poses to those working in person. The demands related to health and safety only reiterate health and safety laws already in place. They write: "SWs [student workers] will be provided with a safe University workspace and will not be required to

work in conditions that pose an unnecessary threat to their health and safety. Towards that end, the University has policies in place to provide such a safe workplace; will maintain such policies during the life of this Agreement; and may improve such policies at its discretion." In other words, the contract allows for what is "safe" to be up to the discretion of the university and the policies of the ruling class as a whole, not what is actually safe for workers, while sending student workers back into classrooms during a deadly pandemic.

As of yet the union bargaining committee is not calling for a strike, instead ostensibly using the threat of a strike at an unspecified future point as leverage, according to their recent Halloween-inspired post, to "spook Harvard and win the contract we deserve." A similar tactic was utilized in June when the union sent a letter of intent to strike signed by over 500 grad student workers. Yet only four days after the letter was received, the bargaining committee began a membership vote to extend the contract after a 5-5 deadlock on the question of a strike.

The context of the two-month extension of the now-expired contract is important for student workers to consider.

During the contract extension vote, a strike by roughly 2,900 Volvo Trucks autoworkers in southwestern Virginia was reaching a decisive turning point after the workers had voted down three UAW-backed sellout contracts. Volvo Trucks workers took matters into their own hands by building the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which raised workers' demands against the opposition of the corporatist UAW.

Just as the UAW blacked out coverage of the strike at other auto factories, the HGSU-UAW leadership made

no mention of the struggles taking place by their class brothers and sisters and gave no perspective or strategy of linking their struggles in conjunction with a “no” vote in the extension of the no-strike contract.

The fact that only 61.5 percent of members supported a contract extension even though the HGSU provided no alternative and that students turned out to vote overwhelmingly to authorize a strike signifies the growing militancy of student workers and their opposition to the conditions sanctioned by the previous contract.

In this struggle, graduate workers must recognize their allies and their enemies. Harvard University, the oldest in the United States, is tied inextricably to its \$41.9 billion endowment, the largest university endowment on the planet. The endowment, which has skyrocketed along with the stock market during the pandemic even as millions have died, provides about twice as much revenue as student enrollment fees for the university.

The process underlying these developments is an education system more and more dependent on and influenced by financing from ever-increasing market gains and wealthy donors, themselves enriched by financial parasitism. Yet these gains for the financial aristocracy are themselves dependent upon the further intensification of the exploitation of the working class and cuts in social spending, infrastructure and the living standards of working people.

Workers face not only the university and the financial aristocracy that funds it, but the UAW, a corporatist apparatus of highly paid executives (450 “earn” six-figure salaries), whose top officials have recently been convicted of taking bribes from auto companies or embezzling workers’ dues.

Like Harvard, the UAW is also deeply tied to the financial markets. Despite losing more than a million members over the last four decades, the UAW saw its assets grow to over \$1.1 billion, \$725 million of which is in investments. Just as the Harvard endowment cannot be touched for the living wage of student workers, so too the UAW strike fund is barely utilized, paying out only \$250 a week to striking General Motors workers in 2019, for example, while UAW executives use it as a multimillion-dollar piggy bank for themselves.

The UAW’s efforts in recent years to unionize

academic workers is driven by the desire to offset the loss of membership among industrial workers by opening up a new source of dues income from academic workers. A demand of the HGSU-UAW in the latest contract is that those who choose not to join the union should nevertheless have a service fee equivalent to union dues, deducted from their pay.

For the financial managers of Harvard and the labor managers of the UAW, the maintenance of their luxurious existence means the maintenance of the continued exploitation of the working class. The deepening social crisis, which the COVID-19 pandemic is accelerating, is driving workers into struggle against the capitalist system and its defenders, including in the unions.

In this struggle, Harvard workers have powerful allies. There are 6,000 unionized Harvard employees, most of whom have contracts expiring this year, but the unions have made no attempt to unite these struggles. Less than an hour away in Worcester, Massachusetts, hundreds of nurses have been on strike for months, the longest such strike in state history. Graduate workers at Columbia University in New York City, also UAW members, have voted to authorize a strike, while thousands of workers in the auto industry are demanding strike action against sellout deals negotiated by the UAW. Workers internationally are also on strike, from Sri Lankan educators to South African metalworkers to German health care workers.

Harvard student workers can and must link up their struggles with other student workers and other sections of workers internationally through forming a rank-and-file committee as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to take the struggle out of the hands of the UAW. The *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality are prepared to offer every assistance. We urge those interested to contact us today.



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