

Harvard graduate student workers to begin three-day strike October 27

Josh Varlin
26 October 2021

Graduate student workers at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, are set to begin a three-day strike Wednesday, October 27. The strike coincides with midterms and with freshman parents weekend at Harvard College, the main undergraduate school at Harvard.

The main issues of contention are pay raises, third-party arbitration for harassment grievances and the demand by the Harvard Graduate Students Union-United Auto Workers (HGSU-UAW) for “agency fees” if a bargaining unit member declines to join the union.

Strikers will include undergraduate and graduate teaching fellows, teaching assistants and course assistants, as well as graduate research assistants, who will cease grading, instruction and research.

Workers voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike in a September vote, with 91.7 percent, or 1,860 members, voting in favor of authorizing a strike. It is unclear how many members will participate in a strike; the last strike, which lasted most of December 2019, saw thousands of participants among the approximately 4,000 members at the time.

Both the HGSU-UAW and the university administration have declared their desire to avoid a strike. Harvard President Lawrence Bacow told the *Harvard Crimson*, the student-run campus newspaper, last week, “We’ve made progress on many issues, and I certainly don’t think a strike is needed in order to come to agreement.” He continued, “It’s my hope and expectation that we will reach an agreement without a strike.”

HGSU President Brandon Mancilla said, “We’re still committed to reaching an agreement with the University before [the strike deadline].”

Nevertheless, unless the HGSU-UAW announces a last-minute deal, thousands of graduate workers strike on October 27, which is also the day of the next bargaining session.

In between the strike authorization vote and

Wednesday’s strike, Harvard released its annual financial report, revealing that its endowment swelled 27 percent in the fiscal year ending June 30, 2021. These returns came from an investment return of 33.6 percent, higher than any year since 2000, the height of the dot-com bubble, bringing Harvard’s endowment to \$53.2 billion, more than the gross domestic product of 124 countries.

An Op Ed in the *Harvard Crimson* noted that, despite Harvard’s much-touted divestment from most fossil fuels, the university continues to invest in and profit from private prisons and half a million acres of illegally purchased and increasingly deforested farmland in Brazil.

Moreover, the university posted a budget surplus of \$283 million, despite declining revenue due to the pandemic and some pandemic-related expenses such as COVID-19 testing, thanks in part to salary and hiring freezes and cutting the pay of 2,800 “idled employees and contract workers” by 30 percent in calendar year 2021.

Despite these enormous gains, the university is offering insulting pay increases well below the present inflation rate. As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted when the strike was authorized:

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 over 5 percent

annually, workers would be treading water and then experience falling wages in real terms.

Many prospective strikers have noted the disparity between the university's endowment gains and budget surplus on the one hand and paltry pay offers on the other. A doctoral student studying climate tweeted, "They profited off of the pandemic and still won't pay us enough[,] make it make sense."

Another doctoral student tweeted, "Over 33% endowment return and still refusing to adjust grad student worker pay to inflation. Shame!"

It is worth noting that the union is not demanding increased measures to safeguard against COVID-19 infection, let alone a return to virtual learning until the pandemic has been brought under control. Indeed, despite vaccination rates of well over 90 percent among both staff and students, Harvard's graduate schools in particular have seen outbreaks.

Instead, the union relies on the university's "policies ... to provide such a safe workplace ... and may improve such policies at its discretion."

The HGSU-UAW's decision to limit the strike ahead of time to three days is consistent with the UAW more broadly, which periodically calls "Hollywood strikes" of a few days or even a few hours to let off workers' steam. When workers do press for prolonged strike action, the UAW starves them with paltry strike pay and divides them from other workers, as exemplified in the current strike of 10,100 John Deere agricultural workers. The Deere workers have been on strike for two weeks even as the UAW is forcing auto parts workers at Dana, Inc., which supplies John Deere, to vote on a second sellout contract after voting down the first by 90 percent.

In going on strike, Harvard graduate workers join thousands of other workers across the country and hundreds of thousands internationally who have gone on strike just this month, in what some commentators are calling "Striketober." This growing strike wave points to the potential for the Harvard graduate workers strike to become an important inflection point in the class struggle, but only if it is taken out of the hands of the UAW. Workers should form an independent rank-and-file strike committee, which seeks to broaden the struggle and articulate demands that genuinely meet workers' needs.

Harvard graduate workers are up against the oldest and wealthiest university in the United States, which is dependent on the stock market and wealthy

"philanthropists" for its revenue and thus tied directly to the defense of capitalism perhaps more than any other university.

However, they also have powerful allies, including thousands of Harvard employees whose contracts have expired or will expire this year. Five thousand such workers, members of the Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers (HUCTW), have been notified that "their" union has reached a tentative agreement with the university for below-inflation 2.9 percent raises and an insulting \$500 bonus.

In addition to the ongoing John Deere strike, hundreds of nurses at Saint Vincent Hospital an hour away in Worcester, Massachusetts, have been on strike since March 8, by far the longest nurses strike in state history. Their strike has been isolated by the Massachusetts Nurses Association and the state AFL-CIO even as the hospital's owner, health care giant Tenet, has brought in scabs to replace striking workers. While the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) has blocked a planned strike of 60,000 media and entertainment workers, 30 of their members have been on strike at the North Shore Music Theatre in Beverly, Massachusetts since October 6, demanding higher pay.

More than 3,000 graduate workers at Columbia University in New York City have also authorized strike action, and 155,000 metalworkers in South Africa held a militant strike this month, during which police gunned down two workers and wounded dozens more.

Harvard graduate workers seeking to broaden their struggle should contact the International Youth and Students for Social Equality and the WSWs today to discuss the way forward.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact