

Harvard Graduate Students Union averts second strike with last-minute tentative agreement

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Hours before graduate student-workers at Harvard University were set to strike on November 16, the Harvard Graduate Students Union-United Auto Workers (HGSU-UAW) reached a tentative agreement (TA) for a four-year contract. A 24-hour vote which ended Wednesday on whether to end the strike reportedly resulted in an “overwhelming majority” in favor of ending the strike, which the union had essentially suspended prior to the vote. A second vote by members on whether to ratify the TA, making it the union’s second contract, will conclude on November 27.

The averted strike was announced just 10 days after graduate student-workers went on strike during midterms and freshman parents weekend October 27-29.

Since the three-day strike, the main points—pay raises, third-party arbitration for harassment grievances and the demand by the HGSU-UAW for “agency” or “service fees” from graduate student-workers who decline to join the union—remain issues of contention, with the current tentative agreement conceding on the latter two demands.

For cases of harassment, the TA “won a legal fund for survivors of arbitration cases of identity-based harassment” but conceded “arbitration for cases of sexual harassment and discrimination or independent hearing or appeals panels for Title IX.” The union already backtracked on its demands for third-party arbitration before the October strike, instead proposing for a majority of third-party legal experts in Title IX Hearings and Appellate panels rather than exclusively third-party arbitration.

In the TA, the union also conceded on “union

security,” i.e., a fee taken from all student workers, regardless of their union status. The union is against an “open shop,” with graduate workers who decide not to join the union receiving the same wages and benefits as union members without paying fees to the union.

What the union bargaining committee considers its one “win” out of its three key demands is the proposal for wage increases. The TA has settled on raises of 5 percent for salaried workers, retroactive from July 1, for 2021, followed by 4 percent for 2022, and 3 percent for the remaining two years of the four-year contract. This is slightly lower than its initial proposal for 5.75 percent, 4.5 percent, and 3 percent raises for the years of a three-year agreement.

With current inflation rates of 6.2 percent, this would mean a 1.2 percent paycut in real terms for 2021, followed by even greater cuts over the course of the contract if inflation remains anywhere near its current levels. One has to ask how these results could be considered a victory by the union.

The situation is even worse for hourly workers in the TA, whose hourly wage will go up to \$20 as of July 2021 and will increase by \$0.50 each year for the next two years, a meager 2.5 percent increase.

Such paltry sums are all the worse because most students work a limited number of hours while attending school full-time. Most international students are legally prohibited from taking up substantial work outside the university to supplement their wages.

Meanwhile, Harvard, the wealthiest university on the planet, posted a budget surplus of \$283 million last fiscal year and saw a return of 33.6 percent from endowment investments, swelling the endowment to \$53.2 billion.

The TA does not mention once the COVID-19 pandemic and the dangers it poses to those working in person. The agreement section related to health and safety only reiterates health and safety rules already in place. It states: “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.

Since August, 342 graduate students have tested positive for SARS-CoV-2, exceeding the 294 cases among graduate students in all prior months since the beginning of the pandemic. Moreover, Harvard Provost Alan Garber has said that the university is likely to loosen restrictions next semester, including allowing unmasked classes.

This is despite warnings by public health experts of a winter surge of the pandemic and the still-emerging consequences of COVID-19, including the potential for long-term debilitating symptoms among vaccinated individuals.

The HGSU-UAW leadership has tried to suppress and isolate graduate students-workers’ militancy. In the minutes of the union’s November 15 meeting, a bargaining committee member spoke to the necessity of accepting the current tentative agreement “even if the members won’t like it” due to an alleged lack of engagement, citing 150 people who were registered to picket as opposed to 600 “last time.” But it had been the bargaining committee itself which disoriented and isolated the rank and file, including with last month’s time-limited strike, while simultaneously making clear that their intention throughout the struggle was to avoid a strike.

At the time of that meeting, over 10,000 other UAW members at Deere were on strike and nearly 200 workers just minutes away at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, also UAW members, were preparing to

strike on November 17. There are also over 3,000 graduate student-workers, members of the Student Workers of Columbia-United Auto Workers (SWC-UAW), at Columbia University in New York City on strike for the second time this year for improved wages and basic social rights in the most expensive city in the US. The strike is part of a years-long struggle by Columbia student-workers for decent working conditions.

The HGSU-UAW made little mention, if any, of these struggles and made no effort to coordinate with them.

Harvard’s endowment and its wealthy patrons, which together in fiscal year 2021 contributed to 49 percent of the university’s revenue, rely on the continued pumping out of profits by the global working class no matter the human toll. This is the only way to maintain the financial markets, upon which both the endowment and Harvard’s donors rely. The current TA, which, if ratified, would become a four-year no-strike contract and does nothing to oppose this setup and, indeed, reinforces it.

In order for rank-and-file student-workers, as a matter of practical necessity, to speak and organize freely must form an independent rank-and-file committee and seek to broaden their struggle to all sectors of workers, in Massachusetts and beyond, who are all coming into struggle against unsafe work conditions, rising living costs, attacks on living standards and the murderous policies of “herd immunity.”

Harvard graduate workers seeking to broaden their struggle should contact the International Youth and Students for Social Equality and the *World Socialist Web Site* today to discuss the way forward.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact