Harvard graduate student union pushes through contract with cut in real wages

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Graduate student-workers at Harvard University ratified a four-year contract with the university that will result in a cut in real wages in a vote that ended November 27. The deal meets neither student-workers' needs nor the union's original demands.

According to the Harvard Graduate Students Union–United Auto Workers (HGSU–UAW), 73.3 percent of the 2,615 union members voted on the deal. Of those who voted, 70.6 percent (1,353 members) voted for the contract and 29.4 percent (564 members) voted against. Factoring in abstentions, only 51.7 percent of union members voted for the contract, which will cover 4,900 student workers.

The HGSU–UAW claimed the most success on wage increases, with the contract including a 5 percent wage increase for 2021 (retroactive to July 1), 4 percent next year, and 3 percent in 2023 and 2024. The union originally proposed a three-year deal with 5.75, 4.5 and 3 percent raises.

While touted as a success by the union, this wage structure represents an effective pay cut of 1.2 percent this year thanks to skyrocketing inflation, currently at 6.2 percent. If inflation continues at or anywhere near this level, the rest of the contract will see even greater cuts, leaving future student-workers even more exploited.

The situation is even worse for hourly workers, whose hourly wage will go up to $20 and will increase by $0.50 each year for the next two years, a meager 2.5 percent increase. Most of these workers are given limited hours per week, and most international students are not legally able to work outside of the university.

Just prior to the October strike, Harvard announced that it had posted a budget surplus of $283 million the prior fiscal year, despite declining revenue. Moreover, the stock market rally brought its endowment, already by far the largest university endowment in the world, to a staggering $53.2 billion, a 27 percent increase.

Significantly, the contract does not even mention arguably the most important labor-related issue: the pandemic. There are some provisions for remote work, but only if agreed to by a supervisor. It is unlikely that teaching assistants can take meaningful advantage of this "option" if classes continue in-person.

The emergence of the new Omicron variant of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, underscores that the pandemic is far from over. Initial evidence indicates that Omicron is more transmissible than the Delta variant and may be vaccine-resistant. Whatever the precise qualities of Omicron, its plethora of mutations make clear that future variants will inevitably evolve, potentially becoming more resistant to vaccines and natural immunity, as long as the virus runs rampant anywhere on the globe.

The contract follows protracted negotiations between Harvard and the HGSU, during which student workers voted overwhelmingly to strike and struck for three days while the union led the struggle into a dead end. Under these conditions, the ratification of the deal (as well as substantial abstention) should be interpreted less as support for the deal itself than as a recognition by student-workers that the struggle had reached an impasse within its current framework.

It is worth reviewing the last semester or so in this light. Over the summer, members narrowly voted to extend their contract, in large part because the union provided no meaningful alternative. This occurred during a rebellion against the UAW at Volvo Trucks in Virginia by 2,900 autoworkers, which saw workers vote down three union-backed contracts and form the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee before the UAW claimed the third contract had passed by a

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handful of ballots in a re-vote.

The HGSU then held a strike authorization vote that lasted until September 30, which returned 91.7 percent (1,860 members) voting in favor of a strike. After weeks of delaying, the union eventually called a strike for October 27, during midterms and freshman parents' weekend at Harvard College, but limited it to three days in advance.

After yet more delay, the HGSU called a second strike for November 16, only to scuttle it at the last minute after announcing a tentative agreement. A bargaining committee member on November 15 said the deal was necessary "even if the members won't like it" due to an alleged lack of engagement from members, even though the union strung along purported negotiations, limited strikes in advance and made clear to all involved that they would prefer to avoid strikes if possible.

During the October strike and until after the November strike was called off, more than 10,000 UAW members were on strike at Deere, the giant agricultural machinery manufacturer, until the UAW forced a re-vote through via intimidation. On November 17, which would have been the second day of the second strike, 200 workers at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, also UAW members, struck, while 3,000 student-workers (and UAW members) at Columbia University in New York City were also on strike.

The UAW made no effort to link up any of these struggles, nor connect the struggle of any other section of workers, such as the hundreds of St. Vincent Hospital nurses on strike less than an hour from Cambridge in Worcester, Massachusetts.

The ratification of the contract does not mark the end of the struggle of Harvard graduate-student-workers for decent wages and working conditions. This struggle, however, cannot be conducted within the confines of the UAW. Harvard graduate workers should work to establish a rank-and-file committee and orient to the international working class, the vast majority of society and the only social force capable of ending the pandemic and establishing a society based on egalitarian and democratic principles.

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

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