

Resident assistants at Tufts University wage one-day strike on freshman move-in day

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Resident assistants (RAs) at Tufts University held a one-day strike on August 29, the day that freshmen moved in for the school year. More than 50 RAs picketed, and first-year students later joined them. The combined group of nearly 200 people marched to the university's West Hall in Medford, Massachusetts and held a rally.

The RAs are demanding a stipend to help pay for food and living expenses. They work at least 20 to 25 hours per week and are perpetually on call to assist the students living in their dormitories. They are required to live on campus in “a cage,” according to one RA who spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS). At Tufts, RAs receive free student housing, but no pay.

RAs' duties include programming activities and building a community in the dormitory, helping students with academic questions, referring students to counseling or other resources and serving as a mentor. RAs are usually the most vulnerable and economically disadvantaged of undergraduate students, and the universities take advantage of this vulnerability.

In December 2022, the RAs voted to form the United Labor of Tufts Resident Assistants (ULTRA) as an affiliate of the Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU). They authorized OPEIU Local 153 to be their representative during contract negotiations. Overall, 89 percent of the RAs voted in favor of the strike, which signaled their strong desire to fight.

The RAs say that the pandemic was a major impetus for their drive to organize themselves. When the pandemic began, the university relied on RAs to enforce mitigation policies among the students. It also instituted long training hours in the summer, when RAs could be on call for over 20 hours per day. “We would have training from 9 to 5 and then be expected to be

making door [decorations] or bulletin boards and preparing for our residents and such, and then they would want us to be on call from 9 to 9, when training starts at 9,” RA Julie Francois, a junior, told *Tufts Daily* last year.

Tufts, a private research university, is a highly selective school that ranks among the top colleges in the United States. Its main campus is in the Walnut Hill neighborhood of Medford and Somerville, Massachusetts, which are two suburbs of Boston. Tufts has an endowment that has grown from approximately \$500 million in 1999 to \$2.4 billion today.

Tufts has taken a firm stand against the RAs. It has mobilized its legal team and sought by any means possible to keep day-to-day operations from being interrupted. Sam Hayne, an RA, told *Tufts Daily* that the university threatened to lock RAs out, which would not only prevent them from working, but also eject them from their living spaces.

Tufts also sent an email warning RAs not to engage in actions that disrespected “community values and one another's right to enjoy the new semester without disruption.” Any “actions or activities that create a hostile campus environment, endanger public safety or violate our Student Code of Conduct” would “be addressed by the appropriate members of our staff,” the administration wrote. This can only be construed as a thinly veiled threat to punish students who waged a strike.

While Tufts has been playing hardball, the union has pulled its punches and telegraphed its willingness to capitulate. For example, ULTRA has not specified the amount of the stipend that it is demanding, thus allowing Tufts to set the terms of negotiation. ULTRA also has stated on X (formerly Twitter) and elsewhere that it hoped that a work action could be avoided and a

compromise reached soon.

Despite the overwhelming vote in favor of a strike, the bargaining committee limited the action to one day. This tactic minimizes the disruption to the university and gives the administration more leverage to reach terms that are favorable to it.

To this point, Tufts has never provided meals to RAs. In the current negotiations, the university is offering a plan of 80 “swipes” per year, which amounts to only five meals per week, according to the union. The inadequacy of this offer is even clearer when one considers that not all RAs are on a meal plan. Thus, a stipend, which affords greater flexibility of food sources, is needed.

At any moment, RAs can be roped into working extra hours at the university’s whim. “I used to be an RA, and move-in day is always an utter disaster,” said one commenter in a recent Reddit post about the strike. “Last year, a ton of extra work was given to the RAs for move-in w/o telling us in advance, and we weren’t paid any extra for working overtime.”

On top of such impositions, RAs are under threat of losing their housing and jobs if their student status changes for any reason. One speaker at the rally spoke of a need to take a leave of absence from classes last school year. In that moment, the RA lost both job and housing. With “little over a month’s notice” and “no institutional support,” the RA, a young undergraduate student whom the university knew to be without a home to return to, was forced into couch surfing and short-term rentals for eight months. This precarious form of existence is commonly known as homelessness.

A reporter for the WSWS asked an RA about COVID-19 on campus and whether, in the context of the return to school during a new wave of the pandemic, the union had discussed demands for safety measures. The RA responded that there had already been “some disruptions since the beginning of school year with COVID” (i.e., transmission on campus), but that the university had not given any guidance. She was unsure whether any discussion had taken place in the union.

“COVID has really gone through my sophomore/junior year,” she said. “It’s hard, because it’s kind of just been integrated into the normal swing of things, even though people have been really

impacted by it.”

The strike reflected a growing mood of rebellion among student workers. This anger has been manifest in strikes and contract rejections by student workers at the University of Michigan, Rutgers University, Eastern Illinois University and Chicago State University. It is part of a growing movement of the international working class against worsening living conditions, attacks on social spending, cuts to real wages, the removal of all public health measures and wave after wave of COVID-19 variants.

The trade unions are attempting to keep workers’ opposition within the confines of the Democratic Party. At the ULTRA rally, speakers such as Medford City Council Vice President Zac Bears, a Democrat and member of Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), presented himself as a friend of labor and demanded that Tufts “do the right thing.” But from the local to the federal level, the Democrats and DSA are breaking strikes, refusing to protect workers against the pandemic and pouring billions of dollars into the war in Ukraine, which could escalate into a nuclear confrontation. They are jeopardizing students’ very right to a future.

Instead of appealing to the Democrats, the RAs at Tufts must turn toward the working class for support. Their fight must be joined with the ongoing struggles of workers in other industries, including autoworkers, teachers, actors and screenwriters, and logistics workers, against attacks on their living standards. This requires that RAs take the initiative themselves by building rank-and-file committees, independent of the OPEIU bureaucracy, to organize their fight. These committees, democratically run by RAs themselves, would discuss and advance basic demands and organize a real fight aimed at mobilizing the broadest support.



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