

Boston University graduate students strike over pay, healthcare, housing and other benefits

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Members of the Boston University Graduate Workers Union (BUGWU) went on strike March 25. BUGWU members include over 3,000 masters, professional and PhD graduate students. They are demanding a new contract guaranteeing pay increases, more health and dental care coverage, plus other benefits such as childcare, affordable housing, workload limits and aid for international graduate students.

BUGWU has been organized since 2022 under Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 509 of the Massachusetts Union for Human Service Workers and Educators. The union includes students involved in research, instructional and teaching work.

Many Boston University (BU) student workers are supporting families and even those who don't are finding it increasingly impossible to survive in one of the most expensive US cities. The cost of living for a single adult in Boston is \$46,918, according to MIT's Living Wage. Bostonpads.com reports the average Boston apartment now rents for \$3,275 a month, up nearly 8 percent since 2023 and 22 percent since 2022. The average studio apartment rents for a staggering \$2,250.

BU is the largest university in Boston, with a student population of about 37,000. It has an endowment of over \$3 billion. Annual undergraduate tuition and fees will rise to over \$90,000 for the 2024-2025 academic year. The millions of dollars charged to students and their families clearly are not ending up in the pockets of grad student employees, who do much of the work at universities, including teaching, grading and leading discussions.

Pol Pardini-Gisperd, a PhD student and graduate worker at BU, told NBC Boston, "I need to go to the class, I need to grade exams but I also need to be working all the time. There's certain hours I need to go to be a teaching fellow, and there's certain hours I need to devote to my

dissertation work." He said he doesn't make enough to afford living in the city and to take care of his 8-month-old daughter. "I can't begin to explain how much we are struggling," he said.

BU grad students had been conducting a strike authorization vote since February 2024. The union voted to authorize a strike by March 25 if an agreement was not reached. Ninety percent of the unionized workers voted to strike. The walkout mainly involves those with teaching responsibilities and graduate students who perform other types of paid service work for BU, and undergraduate students are not included.

More than 30 new bargaining units of graduate students have been formed in recent years in Greater Boston, including at Northeastern and Harvard universities. In September, graduate students at MIT threatened to strike and won their first contract a week later. Numerous graduate and undergraduate worker strikes and protests have taken place across Massachusetts in recent years, including at Harvard, Clark University in Worcester, Tufts University in Medford, University of Massachusetts Amherst, Brandeis University in Waltham, and other colleges and universities.

Nationally, 48,000 University of California graduate assistants, researchers and post-docs, struck in 2022 in the nation's largest-ever strike of academic workers. This spring, more than 500 teaching assistants and fellows, research assistants and associates, course assistants and tutors struck at The New School in New York City.

Graduate student workers have long been relied upon by universities as cheap labor. As at Boston University, many of these academic workers have been organized by the SEIU or the United Auto Workers. These large national unions have seized upon the conditions facing academic workers—including low pay and dismal

benefits—as an opportunity to boost their membership rolls and collect dues money as these unions’ own policies have resulted in massive job losses in their traditional industries.

In what may be an early example of the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) as a strikebreaking tool, Stan Sclaroff, dean of BU’s College of Arts & Sciences, sent an email to BU professors suggesting the staff use AI to “manage course discussion sections and labs that are impacted by the BUGWU strike,” according to the *Daily Beast*.

Sclaroff’s email advised, “Given the disciplinary and pedagogical breadth across the College, there are a wide range of approaches that can be taken.” It listed five suggestions for “discussion sections,” including the use of “generative AI tools to give feedback or facilitate ‘discussion’ on readings or assignments.” Facing pushback, Sclaroff indicated that these were only “suggestions.”

Negotiations between BUGWU representatives and the BU administration began in June 2023. BU administrators took 19 weeks to make their first proposal and their first counteroffer was not submitted until February 2024. BU officials claim they have negotiated in good faith with BUGWU, having met with union representatives on 15 occasions.

According to BUGWU’s Instagram page, BU officials made the following offers:

- An increase in the 12-month PhD student stipends to \$42,159 next year and an overall increase representing 13 percent over three years. BU has also committed to raising the minimum rate for students paid hourly from \$15 to \$18.
- Moving PhD students currently on eight-month stipends to nine-month stipends, which would mean an increase in year one of the contract to \$31,619.
- Covering 33 percent of the cost of MBTA transit passes for 12 months for all BU PhD students and other graduate students in the union.
- Covering the annual cost of dependents that are added to the university’s student health insurance plan for children six years old and under.
- Adding a Graduate Worker Help Fund of \$50,000 and no-interest loans to help with other financial exigencies for graduate workers who do not qualify for the fund.
- Creating a dental insurance plan for all graduate students, which students would fully fund at \$452/year, with PhD students receiving a \$100 subsidy.

The union’s counter-demands are woefully inadequate, asking for a roughly 50 percent stipend increase, to

\$62,440 in the first year of the contract, and that the hourly worker minimum wage be set at \$41.63, more than double BU’s offer, but which would still leave workers struggling. Funding for graduate workers in various BU departments ranges between \$25,000 and \$45,000, with some departments receiving no funding in the summer.

The BU grad strike began with a noon rally March 25 at the school’s Marsh Plaza, which included speeches from graduate students and US Representative Ayanna Pressley, the local Democratic congresswoman. Other speakers included striking representatives of several BU departments as well as members of the Starbucks workers union and unions on other campuses, including Harvard University. US Sen. Elizabeth Warren made a subsequent appearance on the BUGWU picket line, and the state’s other US senator, Ed Markey, expressed his support on Twitter/X.

The appearance of these Democratic Party politicians must be seen by striking grad students for what it is: an attempt to channel the anger of workers behind this big-business party and foster illusions that the SEIU will fight to win a decent contract and not sell them out. The Democrats depend on the bureaucrats who run the SEIU and other unions to stifle workers’ demands.

Academic student workers must unite with all other workers, both nationally and internationally, based on a socialist program to fight both the Democrats and Republicans to put an end to social inequality, war and the danger of dictatorship. This can only happen through the formation of independent rank-and-file committees, as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), democratically controlled by rank-and-file workers themselves and oriented toward the growing movement of the international working class against attacks on wages, jobs and working conditions.



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