

# Will Lehman, candidate for UAW president, calls for support for Harvard academic workers' strike

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The Harvard Graduate Students Union (HGSU-UAW) has set a strike deadline of 12:01 am on April 21, 2026, for 4,000 Teaching Fellows, Research Assistants and other academic workers who voted by 96 percent to walk out after months of failed contract negotiations with the Harvard Corporation.

The sticking point is stark. Teaching Fellows earn between \$18 and \$21 per hour—so little that many qualify for state food stamps—while Harvard sits atop a \$53.2 billion endowment that it channels into financial markets and the military-industrial complex. The university has countered workers' demands with a proposed 2.5 percent annual raise, against a documented need for a 74 percent increase just to achieve pay parity between Teaching Fellows and Research Assistants.

Harvard administration has also rejected workers' demands to protect their international colleagues from Trump's Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) thugs saying this would interfere with their "relationship with the federal government." This comes after Harvard has already surrendered to most of Trump's blackmail demands to destroy academic freedom.

That is not a negotiating position. It is a provocation.

This will be the third strike in HGSU-UAW's history. A five-week walkout in 2019 failed to win an initial contract. The 2021 strike, lasting just three days, was settled on terms so bad that, adjusted for 6.2 percent inflation at the time, workers took a real wage cut of 1.2 percent—a sellout the UAW apparatus nonetheless called a victory.

Will Lehman, candidate for United Auto Workers

president on a platform of rank-and-file power, opposition to war and socialist internationalism, has issued a statement calling on UAW members and all workers to rally behind the Harvard strike—and issuing a sharp warning that the UAW apparatus cannot be trusted to lead this struggle to victory.

Lehman expresses unequivocal support for the Harvard workers but urged them not to wait to see how the union apparatus handles their strike. His most urgent call is for graduate workers to form rank-and-file committees now—independent of the bureaucracy and democratically controlled by workers themselves—to prevent a last-minute sellout. "Do not trust the apparatus to lead this struggle to victory," he writes. "Take control of your own fight."

That warning is grounded on the UAW apparatus's record with academic workers. Beyond Harvard's two previous failed strikes, Lehman points to the University of California in 2024, where academic workers moved to strike in defense of pro-Palestinian protesters attacked and arrested on campus. When university management obtained a strikebreaking court injunction, the UAW apparatus surrendered immediately. Lehman writes that rather than mobilize the enormous power of tens of thousands of UC workers and broader sections of the working class, the bureaucracy capitulated without a fight, sending an unambiguous message: "the apparatus exists not to champion workers, but to contain them—above all, when their struggles threaten to take on an explicitly political character."

The same pattern, Lehman argues, is now playing out at Columbia University, where student workers who overwhelmingly authorized a strike have raised demands that go far beyond wages: cops off campus,

protection for non-citizen workers from ICE detention and deportation, an end to pervasive surveillance, fairer disciplinary processes, and divestment from weapons manufacturers and institutions complicit in the US-backed genocide in Gaza. The response of UAW Region 9A, led by Shawn Fain crony and Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) member Brandon Mancilla, has been to order the local to water down its demands. When workers refused, the apparatus threatened to withhold strike authorization and place the local under trusteeship. Lehman bluntly declares: “This is not union democracy. This is McCarthyite red-baiting in the service of the Democratic Party.”

The threat to non-citizen academic workers is not abstract. Lehman points to the case of Kennedy Orwa, a University of Washington graduate student and member of UAW Local 4121, who was deported last week along with his 13-year-old son—“a stark demonstration of the dangers facing international students and workers across the country.” Yet the UAW apparatus has responded not by mobilizing its membership in defense of its own members, but by counseling compliance and suppressing the strikes and political demands that would give workers the collective power to fight back.

The UAW bureaucracy’s overriding concern, Lehman argues, is not workers’ wages, safety, or democratic rights, but the continuation of its own dues stream and its privileged relationships with university management, the Democratic Party and the capitalist state. The apparatus, he writes, “functions not as a champion of workers’ needs but as an enforcer for the powerful corporate and financial interests that sit on the boards of trustees of Harvard and universities across the country.”

On the political demands academic workers have raised—opposition to the war against Iran, defense of anti-genocide protesters, protection of non-citizen workers from ICE—Lehman argues that both the UAW apparatus and the Democratic Party offer nothing. The Democrats, he writes, “differ only on style, not on the fundamental drive toward war and domestic reaction that growing numbers of academic workers are standing against.”

Lehman situates the Harvard strike within a broader pattern of class confrontation that the UAW apparatus is desperate to prevent from becoming what he calls “a

unified, politically conscious movement of workers against austerity, war and authoritarian rule.” He describes himself as the only candidate for UAW president who unequivocally opposes the war against Iran—a war he characterizes as a bipartisan conflict of imperialist conquest being paid for with “the wages, the public services and the futures of the working class.”

His campaign, he writes, is built on a single strategic premise: “Power must be transferred from the bureaucracy to the rank and file.” That means forming rank-and-file committees at Harvard, Columbia and every UAW local—bodies that are independent of the apparatus, democratically controlled by workers, and connected across industries and borders.

Lehman makes a direct appeal to Harvard graduate workers to run for delegate positions in their locals and help build an insurgent slate to nominate a rank-and-file candidate at the UAW convention. He calls on them to reach out to Columbia workers, coordinate their actions and understand that their battle—for a living wage and democratic rights—is “inseparable from the fight of the entire international working class.”

“There is enormous opposition to this war among workers—in the auto plants, in the warehouses, on the shop floors,” Lehman writes. “Academic workers feel it. Industrial workers feel it. That opposition is real, it is deep, and it is looking for a way to express itself. The task is to give it organized form.”



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