

Harvard graduate workers strike to demand living wages, protection for international students against ICE and for academic freedom

Mike Ingram
21 April 2026

Are you a striking Harvard graduate student or a supporter of the struggle? Fill out the form at the end of this article for information about building a rank-and-file committee to expand the strike.

On Tuesday morning, April 21, 4,000 graduate student workers at Harvard University walked off the job, indefinitely suspending teaching, grading and laboratory research at one of the world's wealthiest institutions. Harvard Graduate Student Union–United Auto Workers (HGSU–UAW) pickets went up at Harvard's main campus in Cambridge and at Harvard Medical School in the Longwood Medical Area, with workers carrying strike signs, megaphones and distributing leaflets to passing undergraduates calling for solidarity.

The workers are fighting for fair pay, with raises that keep up with inflation along with a series of specific political demands, including protections for non-citizen workers. On wages, the gap between what Harvard offers and what workers need is stark. Teaching Fellows earn between \$18 and \$21 per hour—so little that many qualify for state food assistance—while Harvard holds a \$53.2 billion endowment. Harvard has countered workers' demands with an insulting 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.

The strike started after the university failed to make what the union described as any “significant movement” before the midnight deadline, according to bargaining committee member Denish Jaswal.

In a statement issued Tuesday, Mack Trucks worker and socialist candidate for UAW president Will Lehman welcomed the strike, calling it “part of a growing movement of workers and young people... entering into struggle against exploitation, repression and war.”

Lehman stressed that the significance of the strike “goes far beyond a contract dispute,” noting that Harvard workers are raising not only demands for higher wages but also political

demands, including “the defense of international students and immigrant workers, opposition to ICE repression, the protection of democratic rights and academic freedom, and opposition to the integration of universities into the military-intelligence apparatus.”

“These are not separate issues,” Lehman said. “They are all bound up with the same underlying reality: the deepening crisis of capitalism.”

At the same time, Lehman issued a sharp warning about the role of the United Auto Workers apparatus. Union officials have been at the bargaining table for 14 months and have kept graduate students on the job for nearly a year without a contract, while delaying strike action.

“This was not an accident,” Lehman warned. “It reflects a deliberate effort to contain the struggle and prevent it from developing into a broader confrontation.”

The final bargaining session on Monday underscored this reality, sidestepping entirely the economic issues in the dispute. Bargaining committee member Lindsey Adams said the session had “no bearing” on the union's decision to strike. After 14 months and more than 20 sessions, 23 proposals remain unresolved. The next scheduled bargaining session is April 28—a full week into the strike. Harvard Corporation intends to sit out the strike and wait for the union apparatus to impose a sellout deal on their members.

WSWS reporters spoke to Cynthia, a graduate student who is supporting the strike but not presently in the union. She said, “Everybody has a different situation, so there's no one size fits all for all grad students. Some maybe come from more affluent families; others have food insecurities, housing insecurities, supply insecurities. There are all kinds of things from the bare necessities that are just not available to all grad students, for example, a food pantry.

“We don't have a centralized food pantry. Everything is kind of in silos and stigmatized for students that have food insecurities, where they can't really access it. I tried to create

some sort of university-wide system for more grad students specifically, because all of the other Ivy Leagues have one food pantry area for all grad students. Brown has one, Yale has one. They all do, but we don't at Harvard."

She added, "I'm the Vice President for the Harvard Grad Council, so we hear a lot of different issues, and have tried to tackle them, but there's a lot of red tape at the university that kind of stops any kind of initiative to going and branching out to all 12 graduate schools.

"I really hope that this strike does something, and that they're able to negotiate their contract, because it's a very wealthy university, and their work is very important and valuable to students. As a grad student, my TFs [teaching fellows] are probably the first person that I'm able to reach regarding my studies, what I'm learning, my thinking, my process."

The contract expiration has had immediate, material consequences. Since the previous contract expired in June 2025, graduate student workers have been without access to benefit funds that can be used for childcare and medical expenses. For workers already stretched to the breaking point by Boston's high cost of living, this a daily crisis.

Lehman connected these conditions to a broader offensive against the working class. Universities, he noted, have become "a central battleground" amid mass opposition to war, repression and austerity, and the attempt to brand opposition to war as "anti-Semitism" is aimed at silencing dissent.

It would be a serious mistake, Lehman warned, to view the Harvard strike in isolation. "The decisive question is how to expand and unify this struggle," he said, stressing that academic workers must link up with autoworkers and other sections of the working class. "We are all part of the same class, facing the same enemies."

Harvard Academic Workers–United Auto Workers (HAW-UAW), a union comprised mostly of non-tenure-track faculty, is now considering strike action, with their first contract still unresolved after more than 18 months of negotiations. Of 37 proposed contract articles, only 13 have reached tentative agreement. Core disputes over academic freedom, time caps for non-tenure-track faculty, and protections for non-citizen workers remain unresolved. The Faculty of Arts and Sciences separately cut non-tenure-track spending by a quarter, saying it would absorb the reduction through fewer reappointments. HAW-UAW has now opened its own strike authorization vote.

Meanwhile, the Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers (HUCTW) with 5,400 members faces a ratification vote May 12-13 on a one-year tentative agreement; a TA the union signed to block a unified strike with grad students, claiming it was the best officials could attain.

As the WSWS wrote in an April 17 article, the union's agreement is designed to prevent a fight over central issues: healthcare costs, job security and wage adequacy. The one-year contract supported by the union leadership includes a \$2,300

flat raise that leaves healthcare costs unresolved and does nothing to halt the layoffs already gutting departments across the university. HUCTW members are being asked to vote for a one-year pause while the Harvard Corporation conducts its offensive against every other bargaining unit on campus.

Harvard is applying the classic divide-and-conquer strategy of capital with an attempt to settle with the weakest or most pliable union first, then use the precedent to hold the line against the rest. HUCTW's tentative deal, if ratified, will be cited by Harvard's lawyers at every subsequent bargaining session—with HGSU-UAW, HAW-UAW and HUCTW.

Lehman warned that workers cannot rely on the UAW apparatus, describing it as "a bureaucratic structure made up of hundreds of officials who collect salaries of more than \$150,000 a year, including UAW President Shawn Fain (\$276,000), Secretary Treasurer Margaret Mock (\$250,633) and Region 9A Director Brandon Mancilla (\$233,450). Their social position separates them from the rank and file and ties them to the institutions of corporate management and the state." Their role, he said, is to isolate struggles and subordinate them to the political establishment.

Instead, Lehman called for the formation of rank-and-file committees to take control of the strike and expand it. "Every worker in the UAW—and beyond—should be mobilized in support," Lehman said, emphasizing that the struggle must be broadened into a movement of the entire working class.

Harvard's administrators would have workers believe the institution is under extraordinary financial strain—citing frozen federal funding, endowment taxes and capital expenditure pressures. This narrative must be rejected. A university with a \$53 billion endowment and record-breaking fundraising numbers is not in financial distress. It is engaged in class warfare, using the language of austerity to extract concessions from workers while protecting the interests of the financial oligarchy represented on its governing boards.

Harvard's real vulnerability is operational. The university's reputation, its research output, its ability to attract students, faculty and donations, depends entirely on the labor of the workers. Workers have the power, but what is needed is the strategy and the organizational independence to use it.

For information on forming rank-and-file committees, fill out the form below.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact