

Who are graduate student strikers up against at Harvard University?

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The strike by 4,000 graduate student workers that began Tuesday, April 21, is not simply a local contract dispute. It is a fundamental collision between academic workers, who are members of the Harvard Graduate Student Union–United Auto Workers (HGSU-UAW), and a self-selected oligarchy of finance capital that runs and effectively owns Harvard University.

The material reality of the graduate workers is a damning indictment of the capitalist university and its board. Teaching Fellows (TFs), who perform the essential labor of instruction, earn a miserable \$18 to \$21 per hour. In the hyper-inflated Boston economy, these academic workers are routinely driven to apply for food assistance and visit food pantries.

Standing in obscene contrast is the Harvard Corporation, the steward of a \$53.2 billion endowment managed by the Harvard Management Company—a financial behemoth that serves as a clearinghouse for global markets and the military-industrial complex.

The President and Fellows of Harvard College, known as the Harvard Corporation, are the university’s true governing power and its highest fiduciary authority. Far from a benign board of trustees, it functions as a superstructural institution where the interests of the imperialist state and finance capital are fused. Its composition reveals a “Committee of Capital” that manages ideological production as an extension of their corporate portfolios.

Alongside the current president, Alan Garber, the Board includes the following:

The Senior Fellow and Chair of the Corporation since 2022 is **Penny Pritzker**. Pritzker is a billionaire hotel heiress who served as Secretary of Commerce during Barack Obama’s second term. She is the sister of Illinois Governor JB Pritzker and a member of the boards of Microsoft Corporation and Icertis.

Pritzker is a former executive chairman of TransUnion and a past board member of Hyatt Hotels Corporation. She also served as President Biden’s Special Representative for Ukraine’s Economic Recovery and was formerly a member of the board of the Council on Foreign Relations.

Pritzker became Senior Fellow several months after donating \$100 million for a new economics building. The philanthropic gesture and the governing role are inseparable. A \$100 million “gift” is also a down payment on institutional control. This is the ruling class not merely influencing Harvard—It is owning it.

The Treasurer of Harvard University and the Chair of the Harvard Management Company is **Timothy R. Barakett**.

Barakett is the founder and CEO of TRB Advisors, a private investment firm. Prior to founding TRB in 2010, he was the founder and CEO of Atticus Capital, a global investment management firm.

He chairs the Board of the Harvard Management Company, which manages Harvard University’s endowment.

In March 2025, KKR, one of the world’s leading private equity firms, appointed Barakett to its Board of Directors. This appointment is the precise mechanism by which Harvard’s endowment management interlocks with private equity accumulation. Barakett controls how Harvard’s tens of billions are invested.

He now sits on the board of one of the most powerful private equity firms on the planet. An analysis from the Private Equity Stakeholder Project of November 2025 documented a recurring pattern at KKR-owned companies: pushing costs and risks onto workers while extracting profits for investors, with widespread wage violations, mass layoffs and labor rights abuses across its portfolio.

Mariano-Florentino (Tino) Cuéllar has been a Fellow since 2019. The former California Supreme Court Justice has served in three Democratic administrations at the White House and federal agencies, beginning in U.S. Treasury Department in the second term of the Bill Clinton administration. He specializes in intelligence and foreign affairs, was co-chair of the Transition Immigration Working Group for Obama, the “deporter-in-chief.” He then became senior director of the National Security Council in the Obama administration, which directed drone assassinations, including of US citizens, covert regime change operations in Libya and Syria, and the 2014 coup in Ukraine that installed a pro-NATO regime.

Cuéllar now serves as president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, a key think tank in the “intellectual infrastructure” for US foreign policy, whose members move in and out of U.S. Department of State, U.S. Department of Defense and the Central Intelligence Agency.

Joseph Y. Bae has been a Fellow since 2024. He is co-CEO of KKR, the same leading global investment firm where Barakett was appointed to its Board of Directors. Bae has served on the Corporation Committee on Finance, the University’s Global Advisory Council and the Faculty of Arts and Sciences Dean’s Council.

The coincidence is structural, not accidental: Harvard’s Treasurer sits on KKR’s board, and KKR’s co-CEO sits on the Harvard Corporation. This is not a conflict of interest but the system functioning as intended. Two of Harvard’s most powerful governing figures are in a direct institutional relationship with the same private equity firm whose business model rests on leveraged buyouts, wage suppression and the extraction of value from workers in healthcare, manufacturing and logistics.

A Fellow since 2014 is **Kenneth I. Chenault**, who worked up the corporate ranks of American Express, becoming CEO in 2001. In 2007 and 2008, he earned a total compensation of \$50 million and \$42

million, respectively. He is now chairman and managing director of General Catalyst, a venture capital firm where fellow Corporation member **Kenneth C. Frazier** also works.

Frazier is former chairman and CEO of pharmaceutical giant Merck & Co., where he was initially hired as general counsel. He currently chairs health assurance initiatives at General Catalyst. He has served on the boards of Exxon Mobil Corporation and the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA).

General Catalyst is no ordinary venture capital shop. It is central in the privatization of American healthcare, funding “health assurance” models that commodify care delivery. His position on ExxonMobil’s board represents the fossil fuel industry’s purchase of respectability through elite institutional networks. PhRMA membership means direct advocacy for the pharmaceutical industry’s monopoly pricing regime, the same regime that rations insulin to diabetic workers.

Sylvia Mathews Burwell is a newly appointed Fellow in 2026. She has held leadership roles at the Gates Foundation and the Walmart Foundation. Earlier in her career she was director of the federal Office of Management and Budget and chief of staff to Robert Rubin, when he was Secretary of the Treasury under Bill Clinton. Her boss Rubin is the former Goldman Sachs co-chairman and leading architect of financial deregulation. After leaving as Rubin’s chief of staff, she moved to the Gates Foundation (a major proponent of the privatization of public education and public health infrastructure) and the Walmart Foundation (the philanthropic arm of the world’s largest low-wage employer). She then ran the Department of Health and Human Services under President Obama (2014–2017), managing the rollout of the Affordable Care Act, which preserved private insurance profit.

Michael Chae is vice chairman and Chief Financial Officer of Blackstone, the world’s largest “alternative asset management firm,” and serves on the board of the Harvard Management Company. According to *The Guardian*, “Blackstone is the largest commercial landlord in history,” which over the past two decades “has quietly taken control of apartment blocks, care homes, student housing, railway arches, film studios, offices, hotels, logistics warehouses and datacentres.”

With these figures as its leadership, it is no surprise that Harvard finds itself under continued scrutiny with the release of documents from Jeffrey Epstein. As chairman of the international editorial board of the WSWS David North, wrote recently, “The Epstein files reveal the social physiognomy of a degenerate ruling class and oligarchical society in an advanced state of decomposition. Their offenses are rank; they smell to heaven.”

The relationship between Harvard and the late sex offender was the logical outcome of a capitalist enterprise and its pursuit of capital. Harvard accepted over \$9.1 million from Epstein, granting a predator “unfettered access” to the university, including a 2005 Visiting Fellow appointment although Epstein possessed zero academic qualifications.

While former President Larry Summers maintained a “friendly relationship” with Epstein long after Epstein’s 2008 conviction, the Corporation today deploys a different standard for the working class. Wealth bought Epstein institutional immunity, but striking workers and students today face the disciplinary regime, pervasive surveillance and police presence for the “crime” of opposing war.

To justify wage suppression, the Corporation has weaponized a political fiction of “financial distress,” citing a projected \$365 million deficit in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. The university’s own data exposes this lie. In Fiscal Year 2026, the Alumni Affairs and Development unit raised a record-breaking \$629 million in current-use

gifts alone. A university sitting on a \$53.2 billion endowment is not in crisis. It is engaged in a class-driven transfer of wealth from workers to the fund.

The strikers have issued clear political demands:

- **Immediate protection for international students and workers from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)**
- **The removal of cops and surveillance apparatus from campus**
- **Full divestment from military contractors and the global war machine**

These are fully justified and should be supported by all workers. But the Who’s Who of the corporate-financial oligarchy on the Harvard Corporation makes it clear that grad students are in a direct confrontation with the ruling class. To prevail, the strike must be expanded, uniting academic workers across the country, auto and other industrial workers, and developed into a politically conscious counter-offensive against the oligarchy, the fascist Trump administration and its enablers in the Democratic Party—a party of Wall Street and the military-intelligence apparatus.

To fight for this, Harvard academic students must form a rank-and-file committee to oppose the sabotage of the pro-war and pro-capitalist UAW bureaucracy, headed by UAW President Shawn Fain and UAW Region 9A Director Brandon Mancilla. The leadership of the Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers (HUCTW) is currently pushing workers to accept a one-year contract, with a flat \$2,300 raise, a real-wage cut that deliberately isolates the clerical staff from the graduate strikers.

Members of the HGSU-UAW must guard against betrayal by the UAW apparatus. The UAW bureaucracy has ignored two strike votes by academic workers at Columbia University, who are members of Student Workers of Columbia, United Auto Workers Local 2710 (SWC-UAW). UAW Region 9A—directed by Mancilla, a Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) member—ordered SWC to water down its demands for “cops off campus,” protections from ICE, an end to campus surveillance, fairer disciplinary processes and divestment from weapons manufacturers and institutions complicit in the US-backed genocide in Gaza.

The Harvard strike is a central battleground in the global struggle against war, austerity and the capitalist social order. Victory cannot be won by pleading with the Pritzker-led Corporation or trusting the UAW bureaucratic apparatus. Workers must take control by forming a rank-and-file committee independent of the union apparatus and linking their struggle to the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). Only in this way can this critical struggle become the rallying point for a struggle against war, fascism and dictatorship, and the development of a politically conscious struggle for socialism.



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