

Break the isolation: Harvard graduate students' strike must be expanded

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Are you a striking graduate student or academic worker at Harvard, Columbia or another university? Fill out the form at the end of this article for assistance in forming a rank-and-file committee.

The strike by 4,000 members of the Harvard Graduate Students Union (HGSU-UAW), which began on April 21, has reached a critical strategic point. Union and Harvard negotiators reportedly last met Tuesday April 28 and are scheduled to meet next on May 14, with dates allocated for May 29, June 9, and June 23. According to *The Harvard Crimson*, an email to faculty said Harvard put forward an offer that “would raise salaried student worker compensation by 11 percent over four years—from Harvard’s previous 10 percent proposal. The raises would include a 2.75 percent increase upon ratification, a 3.25 percent increase on July 1, and 2.5 percent raises at the start of each of the following two academic years.”

The insulting offer from the Harvard Corporation is a testament to its corporate arrogance. Harvard is proposing wage increases of a meager 3 percent, which represents a significant cut in real wages when measured against the sharply rising cost of living in the Boston area. To achieve pay parity between Teaching Fellows would require a 75 percent increase. The administration has signaled its total disregard for the economic reality of student workers. It’s “offer” is a calculated provocation intended to test the resolve of the strikers and how much and how quickly the UAW apparatus will surrender.

The *Crimson* said the offer “leaves unresolved several of HGSU-UAW’s central contract demands, including stronger protections for non-citizen workers and an agency shop provision, which were not discussed during the meeting.”

This is not merely a dispute over contract language; it is a direct confrontation between graduate workers and the Harvard Corporation—a multi-billion-dollar academic-corporate conglomerate whose personnel include leading figures from Wall Street and the US military-intelligence establishment.

With the walkout nearing the end of its second week, the UAW apparatus has deliberately sabotaged a potential strike of 4,000 non-tenure-track faculty and researchers that would break the isolation of the grad students and double the number of workers on strike against Harvard Corporation.

The Harvard Academic Workers-United Auto Workers (HAW-UAW) union bargaining committee unilaterally called off plans for a strike, in a flagrant attack on democratic principles in overriding a clear mandate from the membership. Fifty-three percent of attendees at a meeting on Monday April 19 voted to close the ongoing strike authorization vote and begin striking immediately. The bargaining committee cited “procedural confusions” and “notification windows” to justify an action that rules out any strike action for the remaining semester.

At the same time, the UAW bureaucracy has blocked a strike by the Columbia University graduate workers. UAW Region 9A Director Brandon Mancilla, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America, has

intervened to pressure the Student Workers of Columbia (SWC) to drop political demands that student workers had overwhelmingly authorized, including protections for non-citizen workers, limits on campus surveillance and other democratic demands.

Rather than abiding by 91.5 percent strike mandate by the SWC rank and file, Region 9A officials threatened to put the local union under trusteeship if it refused to comply. Even after the SWC leaders agreed to water down their demands, the UAW International refused to authorize a walkout after a second strike vote by the members.

As the former President of HGSU-UAW at Harvard, Mancilla was instrumental in the 2021 strike of graduate students that lasted just three days and was settled on terms that was a real wage cut of 1.2 percent. The sellout agreement was nonetheless called a “victory” by the UAW apparatus.

Will Lehman, a rank-and-file Mack Trucks worker from Pennsylvania who is running as a socialist candidate for UAW president, issued a statement April 30, titled, “Defend the right to strike: Oppose the UAW bureaucracy’s sabotage of Columbia and Harvard academic workers’ struggles.” Responding to the sabotage of these struggles, he said:

The UAW bureaucracy continues to demonstrate that it does not represent the interests of its rank-and-file worker members, but functions as an obstacle to our struggle. At Columbia, thousands of UAW student workers voted overwhelmingly to begin striking on April 23 for their second contract. At Harvard, where UAW graduate student workers are currently on the picket line for their third contract, a majority of UAW non-tenure track faculty voted to go on strike this week for their first contract. Yet instead of authorizing and unifying these struggles into a common fight against these wealthy institutions, the UAW apparatus blocked the democratic will of the rank and file and called off the strikes of Columbia student workers and Harvard faculty members.

A strike is the central and most powerful tool that workers have. Withholding our labor brings production or education to a halt, which the employers can’t do without. It should be the employer who is most anxious to prevent a strike, not a workers’ union. In defying strike mandates, the UAW leadership acts as an arm of management and tramples on the right of workers to fight for improved conditions. These actions are not an accident or a misunderstanding. It is the predictable behavior of a bureaucracy that fears the independent mobilization of workers more than it fears the corporations and universities that exploit them.

Lehman said these betrayals were not the exception but the rule, citing the UAW bureaucracy’s role in keeping tens of thousands of University of California academic workers on the job earlier this year and then

“pushing through a sellout contract.” At Nexteer Automotive in Saginaw, Michigan, where 1,300 auto parts workers rejected a UAW-backed concessions contract by 96.2 percent only to see union officials conspire behind their backs to extend the contract and then tell workers it was illegal to strike.

He continued:

Workers should draw the necessary conclusions. The problem is not insufficient militancy among workers. The problem is the bureaucracy itself. A union leadership that refuses to respect strike votes, blocks unified action and makes decisions behind closed doors cannot be reformed. It must be abolished by a rank-and-file movement that places power directly in the hands of workers on the factory floor, in the classrooms and across the universities...

A simultaneous strike at Columbia and Harvard by student workers and faculty would set an example for educators, healthcare workers, autoworkers and public-sector employees nationwide. It would link the fight for livable wages to the defense of democratic rights and draw in students and workers into a broader movement. That is precisely what the union bureaucracy, along with both political parties of the capitalist ruling class, fear and work to prevent.

Lehman concluded:

The way forward is clear. The membership must take matters into their own hands. The transfer of power from the UAW bureaucracy to the rank and file is not a slogan; it is the only path to win our just demands. Rank-and-file committees—democratically elected by workers, independent of bureaucratic officials—must be formed on every campus and in every workplace. These committees must coordinate and mobilize for real strike action and have full access to the UAW’s nearly \$1 billion strike fund, which is paid for with our dues.

My campaign stands for the abolition of the bureaucratic apparatus and the return of power to the workers. My program demands full wage recovery, equal pay for equal work, strong protections for non-citizen workers, defense of academic freedom, and the unconditional right to strike. It insists on international working class solidarity and the building of a network of rank-and-file committees capable of coordinating united actions across universities, industry and national borders. All academic workers interested in this perspective and program should contact my campaign and join this fight.

The betrayals at Harvard and elsewhere are rooted in the material interests of the UAW bureaucracy. UAW President Shawn Fain has a salary of \$276,000 and Mancilla is paid \$233,450. This social layer, whose six-figure salaries and immense privileges are drawn from the dues of the workers, views a genuine, uncontrolled strike as a threat to its own assets.

The treachery of the UAW apparatus is also indelibly bound up with its support for the Democratic Party. While Harvard President Alan Garber attended a secret conservative gathering and joined closed-door discussions over higher education and the university, most of the Harvard Corporation board are supporters of the Democratic Party. From 2021-2022, members donated over \$1.5 million federally, with just \$12,900 going to Republicans.

As the Trump administration has reportedAs the Trump administration has reported billion in federal grants and placed Harvard under “heightened cash monitoring” as it presses the Ivy League school to crackdown on academic freedom and anti-genocide protests. But the Democrats have functioned as Trump’s enablers both in the attacks on academic freedom and especially in relation to war. It was the Biden administration that initiated the criminalization of students, slandering anti-genocide protesters as “antisemitic.”

Democrats have played a central role in passing a \$1.2 trillion spending package that is funding the US military through September 2026. The pseudo-left figures such as Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and the DSA play a critical role attempting to neutralize mass anti-war opposition and tie workers and youth to the pro-war Democratic Party. The entire UAW leadership plays a critical role in this. While President Shawn Fain openly praises Trump’s tariff policies and pledges to make the UAW a partner in wartime production, DSA member Mancilla enforces the dictates of UAW International.

The HGSU-UAW workers cannot win their demands if the strike remains directed by the UAW apparatus. To break the deadlock, Harvard workers must take the initiative to form an independent rank-and-file committee, which will fight to mobilize the working class independently and in opposition to both corporate controlled parties and the labor bureaucracy that serves them.

This committee, democratically controlled by the strikers themselves, must immediately move to break the isolation of the strike. The struggle must be expanded to include every UAW member on the Harvard campus, as well as the broader working class throughout the Boston area.

A rank-and-file Committee would reject Harvard’s insulting offer out of hand and demand a contract that includes full COLA and living wages, funded by a redistribution of the university’s massive endowment. It would also enforce the political demands from the workers, 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.

Under such leadership, the Harvard strike can and must become a catalyst for a broader fight by the working class against war and dictatorship and for workers’ power and socialism.

For help establishing a rank-and-file committee, fill out the form below.



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