

# Harvard graduate workers strike enters fourth week: Build rank-and-file committees to break the UAW's isolation

Mike Ingram  
10 May 2026

The strike by 4,000 graduate student workers at Harvard University, now entering its fourth week, has thrown into sharp relief the systemic exploitation of academic labor that underlies the operations of every major research university in the United States.

The Harvard Graduate Student Union–United Auto Workers (HGSU–UAW) walkout, which began April 21, is not a local dispute over a few percentage points of salary. It is a concentrated expression of the deepening crisis of capitalism as it penetrates the university and the conditions of intellectual and scientific labor.

Graduate student workers occupy a peculiar and deliberately obscured position in the contemporary capitalist university. They are simultaneously enrolled students and full-time workers, a dual status that universities exploit to suppress wages, deny benefits and undermine labor rights.

As Teaching Fellows (TFs), they stand at the front of undergraduate classrooms, lead discussion sections, design curricula, administer exams and provide the individualized instruction that constitutes the actual educational experience of tens of thousands of undergraduates.

As Research Assistants (RAs), they run the laboratories, collect and analyze data, write code and generate the scientific and scholarly output that earns universities billions in federal grants and private donations. In the humanities and social sciences, they are the primary intellectual interlocutors for entire cohorts of students. In the sciences, a tenured professor's lab would simply cease to function without them.

This is not peripheral work. It is the core of what a university does, and it is performed by workers who, at Harvard, earn between \$18 and \$21 per hour—so little that many qualify for government food assistance programs.

This is a national condition. At the University of Maryland, a graduate assistant in the College of Information takes home roughly \$2,100 a month after taxes while paying around \$2,000 for a one-bedroom apartment near campus. At the University of Michigan, the research assistant “stipend” sits roughly \$6,000 below what a living wage calculator estimates is needed for a single adult to cover basic costs.

A 2025 survey at the University of Colorado Boulder found that only 37 percent of graduate students receiving financial support said their stipend adequately covered the cost of living. This figure should be understood not as a local management failure but calculated exploitation for financial gain.

More than a quarter of graduate students nationally report suffering from housing or food insecurity. They are working in some of the most intellectually demanding environments in the world while rationing food, taking on debt to cover rent and deferring medical care because the university's benefit funds—which at Harvard have been inaccessible since the previous contract expired in June 2025—do not adequately cover the costs of basic health needs.

*World Socialist Web Site* spoke to the AS, student worker at UMass Boston. “I’m a fourth-year PhD student at UMass Boston, and I TA [teaching assist]. The TA stipend for PhD and master’s students is actually the same. We do pay master’s students, which is nice, at least in the biology department, but it’s the same rate, which feels a little crazy. We get \$22,000 a year, and we actually just won a raise of \$2,000 this past year. So the first three years I was TAing, I was making \$20,000. That includes free tuition and such, but it’s a fair amount of work for low pay.”

AS said that after the raise, the payroll and benefit enrollment system became purposefully convoluted, which she thinks is “retaliatory against the raise.”

She added, “After we won our raise last year, they introduced a new system for enrolling in healthcare. Dental is actually separate and a lot more expensive, so most of my peers don’t have dental insurance, which I know is common.

“The health insurance itself is good. We pay about \$1,000 a year for it. But the way it’s done is that we have a specific enrollment period where we need to email a particular administrator to enroll, and we have to do this every semester. There’s only a short time window where we can email or we won’t get insurance.

“We also have to pay for it first and then get reimbursed, but the school doesn’t tell us the proper amount the insurance costs. So it’s kind of a guess, and a lot of times we end up getting like seven dollars back because the calculations were incorrect. There’s really no departmental help on that.”

While workers already had a system where they pay and then get reimbursed, after the pay raise, the narrow enrollment period became much narrower “and we have to do it twice a year.”

“What happened to me—and this happened to some of my peers too—is that I enrolled in health insurance for the semester. I’m chronically ill and have medication and lots of doctor’s appointments, so health insurance is very important to me. I was enrolled in 15 credits, which is full-time, and then later dropped to 12 credits, which is also full-time.

“Even though I was still full-time, they removed my health insurance without notifying me. I spent two weeks emailing the person in charge trying to fix it with no response until I finally CC’d all her bosses. Then she fixed it immediately. It was frustrating because I was worried about paying thousands in medical costs while they could have solved it very easily.”

AS said she has a second job to try to make ends meet: “A lot of people are struggling, especially because UMass Boston has many first-generation students and immigrants, so we don’t necessarily have the same financial support students at other schools might have. We also have to pay \$15 a day to park at school.

“Having a second job takes time away and adds another level of stress. The school also doesn’t give us summer pay, and there are only five TA positions in my department during the summer. My adviser ran out of money, so this summer I’ll basically be working as a lab tech for my own lab, doing things like filling pipette tip boxes and routine tasks. The pay still isn’t great. I’m entering year five of my PhD and trying to wrap up and write my thesis, but instead I’ll spend days doing basic lab work instead of working on my own projects. That’s going to add stress and probably delay my graduation.”

Asked about the unions at UMass, she said, “I’m not deeply involved in the union meetings, but I have peers who are. I read the email updates and I’ve attended a few meetings. It does seem like the union is trying to get us better benefits.” She then added, “But they spent something like three years fighting for basically a dollar raise, so either the school is fighting back extremely hard or the union isn’t very effective. Because \$22,000 a year in Massachusetts is criminal.”

She said that the strike going on at Harvard is not a big part of a discussion at UMass as it should. “I have friends at Harvard and I live nearby, so I see it firsthand, but many of my peers probably aren’t even aware of what’s happening. But I do think people should be talking about it more. I have classmates on SNAP benefits. I personally don’t qualify because I make about \$500 too much, which is another terrible thing about the system.”

### **International students: The sharpest edge of the attack**

Among the demands that Harvard’s administration has most conspicuously refused to engage in is the protection of non-citizen workers from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). International graduate students make up a substantial proportion of the workforce in STEM fields at every major research university.

At Harvard, as across the country, they are among the most exploited and most vulnerable members of the academic labor force carrying the same workloads and enduring the same poverty wages as their domestic colleagues, while simultaneously navigating a federal immigration apparatus that has become increasingly hostile, arbitrary and weaponized.

The Trump administration’s assault on international students has been systematic. Visa revocations have swept campuses across the country. The Department of Homeland Security proposed last August to end the longstanding “Duration of Status” policy for F-1 visa holders, a change that would replace open-ended educational status with a rigid four-year limit, introduce new restrictions on changes to a major or degree level and require students to file for extensions through an immigration bureaucracy that is openly hostile to their presence.

Social media screening has been mandated for all F and J visa applicants. Roughly 17 percent fewer new international students arrived in the United States in fall 2025 compared to the previous year.

The human consequences are not abstract. Kennedy Orwa, a University of Washington graduate student and UAW Local 4121 member, was deported along with his 13-year-old son in April. The Trump administration is expediting its plans to deport Mahmoud Khalil, a Columbia University graduate student, for opposition to the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza. These are stark demonstrations of what federal policy means in concrete human terms for the workers whose research Harvard and every other major institution depend upon.

When Harvard’s administration refused to include protections for non-citizen workers in contract negotiations, citing a desire not to interfere with its “relationship with the federal government,” it made a political declaration. It chose its institutional relations with the fascist

administration over the safety and rights of its own workers.

The striking Harvard workers’ insistence on these protections is not simply a labor demand. It is, as Will Lehman, a rank-and-file Mack Trucks worker from Macungie, Pennsylvania, running as a socialist candidate for UAW president, rightly noted, a political demand bound up with the defense of democratic rights and academic freedom against the integrating logic of university administrations and the imperialist state.

Discussing the political demands being advanced in the Harvard strike, we asked if AS has seen the same types of attacks on international students at UMass.

“Definitely,” AS said. “My adviser is an immigrant from Brazil and even she’s afraid when traveling internationally. She carries all her paperwork constantly. Some students have had problems with visas and work permits, and there have even been students who weren’t allowed back into the US after visiting home. It’s obviously terrible and affects both the students and the work being done at the university.”

She added, “When the government promotes hostility toward immigrants, it spreads throughout institutions and everyday life.”

### **The UAW apparatus: Labor’s lieutenants of capital**

No analysis of the Harvard strike is complete without an examination of the role being played by the United Auto Workers (UAW) bureaucracy, a role that is one of containment, delay and betrayal.

Members of HGSU-UAW voted by 96 percent to authorize strike action in near-unanimous expression of class anger building for more than a year of fruitless bargaining under UAW supervision.

The apparatus delayed the walkout for months after their strike mandate was delivered, keeping workers at the table with an administration that had no intention of offering a fair settlement, while the previous contract’s benefit provisions—covering childcare and medical expenses—remained inaccessible.

The record of the UAW apparatus with academic workers is consistent. The 2021 HGSU-UAW strike was settled after three days on terms that, adjusted for inflation, amounted to a real wage cut of 1.2 percent, which the apparatus nonetheless declared a victory.

At the University of California, when academic workers moved to strike in defense of pro-Palestinian protesters facing arrest and administrative repression, the apparatus surrendered immediately upon receipt of a strikebreaking injunction.

At Columbia University, UAW Region 9A Director Brandon Mancilla—a member of the Democratic Socialists of America, the political organization that performs the essential function of channeling left-wing sentiment back into the Democratic Party—intervened directly to suppress strike action and pressure the Student Workers of Columbia (SWC) to abandon political demands, including protections for non-citizen workers, limits on campus surveillance and divestment from military contractors.

Before the local union complied, the apparatus threatened trusteeship. Even after the SWC leadership capitulated and watered down the political demands the UAW International still refused to authorize a strike. Mancilla was the former president of HGSU-UAW at Harvard itself—the very union whose strike he is now helping to strangle.

Meanwhile, at Harvard itself, the leadership of the Harvard Academic Workers-UAW (HAW-UAW)—the union representing non-tenure-track faculty—unilaterally cancelled planned coordinated strike action that 53 percent of attendees at a general meeting had voted to launch immediately.

The pretext was “procedural confusions” and “notification windows.”

The substance was the deliberate prevention of a unified front of academic workers that would have fundamentally altered the balance of forces and threatened Harvard's ability to conduct its end-of-year examinations and commencement operations.

UAW President Shawn Fain, who publicly backs Trump's tariff policies and framed the union as a partner in wartime industrial production, has done nothing to mobilize the broader UAW membership in support of the Harvard strikers. The entire apparatus functions, as Lehman stated plainly, as the "labor lieutenant" of the Harvard Corporation and the corporate-political establishment it serves.

The WSWS discussed with AS, the grad student at UMass, the relationship between military spending and poverty wages at home. "Of course there's a connection," she responded. "The government spends enormous amounts of money on wars most people don't support, while people here struggle with poverty, food insecurity and healthcare costs. That money is being taken away from people who actually need it." Explaining the connections between the universities and the state and those broader priorities, she said, "Certainly if it makes them money. They're not putting people first."

When discussing the campaign of Will Lehman and the statements he has issued in support of graduate student workers, she responded, "I think that's exactly the kind of person who understands working people's struggles. Even though we're in different fields, we're all workers dealing with wages and working conditions. I grew up in a blue-collar family. My family struggled with low wages and poor working conditions too. Academia reflects a lot of the same problems. Conditions are terrible, the pay is terrible, and now with government funding cuts there's even less support available."

Speaking of the connection between industrial and academic workers, she said, "We're both workers with bosses who determine our wages and conditions. If the wages are unfair or the conditions are poor, we're affected regardless of the type of work we do. Universities and administrators make far more money than they should while actively harming us by refusing raises and fighting against improvements."

## The way forward

The Harvard graduate workers' strike is a focal point of the class struggle in American academic life. But it cannot be won if its direction remains in the hands of the UAW apparatus, whose institutional interests lie in reaching a settlement—any settlement—that takes the workers off the picket lines and produces a contract the bureaucracy can present as a victory while Harvard's administration locks in another cycle of wage suppression.

The demands of the HGSU-UAW strikers—living wages, protection for non-citizen workers from ICE, independent arbitration for harassment and discrimination complaints, academic freedom protections, divestment from military contractors and weapons manufacturers and opposition to campus surveillance—are fully justified and deserve the support of the entire working class.

But these demands can only be secured through the independent organization of the workers themselves, in rank-and-file committees that are democratically controlled by the strikers and accountable to no institutional interest other than the workers' own.

Such committees must reach beyond the Harvard campus to their class brothers and sisters in other bargaining units—the HAW-UAW non-tenure-track faculty whose own planned strike was sabotaged by the apparatus, the Columbia graduate workers whose political demands were suppressed and the clerical workers whose leadership just accepted a one-year

holding contract that amounts to a real-wage cut in everything but name, a flat \$2,300 raise on a one-year contract. For a worker earning around \$55,000, this is barely a 4 percent raise, well below inflation.

The fight must be extended to autoworkers, healthcare workers, educators at every level and the broader working class mobilizing against exploitation, war and the assault on democratic rights. This is an international struggle led by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) and committees should affiliate to it to develop a joint fight with workers internationally.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**