

# UAW apparatus shuts down grad student strike at Harvard University: The political issues

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After 40 days on strike, the approximately 4,000 graduate student workers of the Harvard Graduate Student Union–UAW (HGSU-UAW) have been ordered back to work by the union apparatus without a contract or any meaningful concession from Harvard’s administration. This is the latest in a series of struggles betrayed by the union apparatus, which is determined to prevent the emergence of working class struggle.

The workers had walked out on April 21 demanding wages that keep pace with the brutal cost of living in Cambridge and Boston. Teaching fellows earn between \$18 and \$21 an hour, and many qualify for state food assistance. They also fought for enforceable protections against advisor harassment, childcare subsidies and expanded health coverage. Graduate students demanded protections for international and non-citizen students against ICE and an end to the integration of the university into the military-intelligence apparatus.

Harvard’s administration, steward of a \$56.9 billion endowment, refused to move on any of the demands.

More than 81 percent voted over the weekend to end the strike. This vote did not express support for the HGSU-UAW’s empty claim that the strike “has broken Harvard’s chronic stonewalling behavior at the bargaining table.” Rather, the vote reflects the fact that, having been isolated and with the academic year drawing to a close, workers did not see a path to victory. The bureaucracy had led them into a blind alley.

The UAW apparatus systematically isolated the strike from the outset, preventing any appeal to broader sections of the working class in Cambridge, Boston and beyond.

The Harvard graduate workers have joined a long list of workers betrayed by the UAW. At Nexteer Automotive in Saginaw, Michigan, 1,700 workers have now rejected three consecutive UAW-backed contracts, while officials have refused to honor their strike vote—in order to isolate a strike at American Axle’s Three Rivers plant. Thousands of

workers at the Big Three automakers have lost their jobs since the UAW declared victory in its 2023 “stand-up strike,” which was deliberately limited to a few plants to undermine its power.

The UAW has repeatedly isolated and/or shut down struggles of academic workers who are members of the union. At the University of California earlier this year, the union bureaucracy kept 40,000 academic workers on the job without a contract for weeks, despite a 93.3 percent strike authorization vote, before ramming through a contract.

There are many signs that the American working class, driven into struggle by impossible living conditions, inequality, political repression and war, is on the cusp of colossal social struggles, in which it will emerge as the leading social force. The conscious role of the apparatus is to disrupt and frustrate this growing tendency as much as possible, preventing the immense opposition from below from finding an organized, conscious form.

The academic workforce is being proletarianized, and any illusions that ivied campus walls separate graduate students from the rest of the working class are being shattered. Tens of thousands of graduate students have joined the UAW in recent years in the belief that affiliation with a major union would connect their struggles with those of the working class and give them the means to fight. Instead, the bureaucracy is treating them with the same contempt shown to every other section of the membership.

The UAW expanded aggressively into graduate student “organizing,” not out of concern for academic workers’ conditions, but to offset the loss of dues income the bureaucracy has suffered as a consequence of decades of auto layoffs and plant closures it did nothing to prevent. Having recruited these workers, it now does everything it can to hold them back.

The union bureaucracy is not simply a layer of corrupt, conservative officials. It is a social layer, with its own distinct interests, which functions as a pillar of class rule.

UAW President Shawn Fain had such close connections to the Biden White House that he functioned as a de facto member of the administration. Today he supports Trump's trade war measures, blaming workers overseas for layoffs carried out by American capitalists. Under the hypocritical slogan of the "Arsenal of Democracy," he is offering up the union's workers for exploitation in a new war economy.

Harvard, for its part, is a key institution of American capitalism and US imperialism—a place that trains future senators, presidents, generals and CIA operatives. The Harvard Corporation is composed of a veritable who's who of the corporate-financial oligarchy and military-intelligence establishment. When Harvard's administration speaks, it speaks to a considerable degree as a direct representative of the ruling class.

This ruling class is today engaged in a ruthless offensive on all fronts, carrying out mass layoffs, waging wars to conquer natural resources and supply chains and shoring up a tottering economic system on the backs of workers both in the US and abroad. It is moving toward openly authoritarian methods of rule more consistent with the oligarchic structure of American society.

Harvard and other universities have responded with absolute ruthlessness to all signs of opposition from students, whether it be strikes, opposition to the genocide in Gaza or other protests. They are being converted into heavily policed centers of propaganda rather than scholarship.

Trump has frozen \$2.2 billion in federal grants to Harvard, placed it under "heightened cash monitoring," threatened its tax-exempt status and demanded an audit of "viewpoint diversity"—that is, the imposition of right-wing extremism. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth has terminated all professional military education and fellowships at Harvard, branding it a "red-hot center of Hate America activism." The Trump administration even moved to revoke Harvard's ability to enroll international students.

The issues in this strike, as with every other, are inseparable from the struggle to build an independent movement of the working class, in opposition to the entire political establishment and in rebellion against the trade union apparatus. For this reason, the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees urge workers to form their own rank-and-file organizations, excluding union officials, to fight to override bureaucratic violations of their will, for real control over their own struggles, and to link up with workers in other industries around the world.

The pseudo-left plays a central role in diverting growing left-wing and anti-capitalist sentiment back into safe channels, especially into the Democratic Party and the union

bureaucracy. Brandon Mancilla, a Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) member, rose from the leadership of the HGSU itself to become director of UAW Region 9A and a senior figure in Fain's inner circle. The local leadership of the HGSU-UAW is largely composed of DSA members.

Mancilla played the leading role in ordering graduate students at Columbia University to abandon demands for protections against ICE, an end to campus surveillance and divestment from weapons manufacturers. The UAW twice refused to authorize strike action despite overwhelming votes in favor, blocking a united movement of Harvard and Columbia academic workers.

The brand of "socialism" offered by the DSA and other pseudo-left groups rejects the class struggle and the revolutionary role of the working class, replacing them with left-sounding phrases and modest reform proposals which evaporate the instant they meet with opposition from the ruling class. DSA member and New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani, elected on the basis of widespread opposition to inequality, immediately dropped his campaign pledges and met with Trump in two White House visits. In his latest bid to reassure Wall Street, he has formed a Commission on Government Efficiency, or "COGE," modeled transparently on Trump's DOGE, which carried out scorched earth federal layoffs last year.

The most basic demands of the working class—for wages, healthcare, democratic rights—collide at every point with a ruling class that is unwilling and unable to meet them. As it develops, the logic of this struggle poses ever more sharply the question of who holds power and in whose interests society is organized.

The way forward for Harvard's graduate students is the same as for every other section of the working class. Workers must break the stranglehold of the bureaucracy and the political establishment it serves and forge genuine links with the broader working class in a common struggle.

That clash must be consciously prepared through the development of a socialist movement rooted in the working class—one that unifies these struggles, arms workers with a clear understanding of what they are fighting against, and builds the political leadership capable of taking these struggles to their necessary conclusion.



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