

Harvard University graduate student workers vote 88 percent for strike authorization

Mike Ingram
8 October 2026

Harvard University graduate student workers have voted 88 percent in favor of strike authorization. The result was announced in an Instagram post of the Harvard Graduate Students Union-United Auto Workers (HGSU-UAW) on Tuesday, October 6, but the post did not include voter turnout.

The more than 4,000 graduate student workers in the HGSU-UAW face the same issues that were central to the 40-day strike that began in April. In addition to demands on wages and conditions, they are fighting in defense of international and non-citizen workers.

In April 2025, the Trump State Department revoked the visas of seven students and five recent graduates amid the administration's push to deport international students involved in pro-Palestine protests. In May 2025, the Department of Homeland Security revoked Harvard's certification to enroll international students, putting some 6,800 students at risk of transfer or removal. Harvard sued and won court orders blocking the revocation, and the administration has said it will not enforce it, but the case is ongoing and students remain at risk.

Workers who voted 96 percent for strike authorization in the spring and 88 percent again now are engaged in a directly political struggle. They are demanding protection for international students and immigrant workers against ICE repression. They are also fighting for the defense of democratic rights and academic freedom and opposition to the integration of the universities into the military-intelligence apparatus.

Harvard University is fully integrated into the military apparatus and serves a specific class function. It produces the ideology, personnel and research for US imperialism. Harvard's 2024 "neutrality policy" was aimed squarely at suppressing opposition to the Gaza genocide. The university refused any boycott of Israel, and Harvard Corporation withheld degrees from 13 students who protested the genocide.

The 40-day strike that began April 21, 2026, was ended by the HGSU-UAW leadership without a contract or any meaningful concessions from Harvard.

The new vote comes after 19 months of negotiations and 36 bargaining sessions, according to the union. Despite the union leadership's self-congratulatory claims of "movement" at the bargaining table, Harvard has made only an insulting wage offer of 6.1 percent on ratification and 13.9 percent over the life of the contract, according to its negotiations update October 2. In Greater Boston, where housing, food and energy costs continue to surge,

this would represent a severe cut in real wages.

Harvard continues to reject any protections for immigrants or any guarantees on academic freedom. In fighting for their demands, student workers are confronting not only Harvard but the state and the entire political establishment. Workers also confront the opposition of the UAW leadership.

Under Shawn Fain's presidency, the UAW has betrayed or shut down a series of academic worker strikes. This includes the University of California anti-genocide strike of May 2024. After academic workers in the 48,000-member UAW Local 4811 voted to strike against the police crackdown on campus protests and the genocide in Gaza, the UAW bureaucracy stalled, then seized on a court injunction as the excuse to formally end the strike.

Fain was promoted by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and the pseudo-left as a "reform" leader who would break with the union bureaucracy. He stands firmly against the interests of the working class and collaborates with the fascist Trump administration. Fain has voiced his support for Trump's tariff and trade war policies and supports the conversion of plants to war production. He has used Roosevelt's World War II slogan, the "Arsenal of Democracy," to align the union bureaucracy with US militarism and the drive toward World War III.

The Fain leadership is fully supported by the leadership of the HGSU-UAW. Asked outside a recent general meeting of the local about Will Lehman's campaign for UAW president as the candidate of the rank and file, HGSU-UAW President Denish Jaswal proudly replied she was voting for Fain. She said he "has been very supportive" and "calls us often."

The HGSU-UAW apparatus will use the vote as a bargaining chip to cover its own capitulation unless workers take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands. The union said in its Instagram post announcing the vote that the leadership "will do everything in our power to avoid a strike."

Whatever has been discussed with Harvard behind closed doors, the real position of the Corporation was revealed in a letter of October 2 from Harvard's Office of Labor and Employee Relations to the HGSU-UAW leadership. It warned them that "federal labor law does not protect intermittent strikes—that is, strikes that start, end with members returning to work, and then restart in support of the same goals." Harvard said of the second vote, "You confirmed at the bargaining table that a second strike would be in support of the same issues from the first strike" and threatens, "The University believes a second strike in these

circumstances would not be protected under the law.”

The HGSU bureaucracy has gutted core contract demands to prepare a settlement on management’s terms. At the September 24 bargaining session, by its own admission, the bargaining committee offered to give up union oversight of the benefit funds, which cover healthcare reimbursements, dental, childcare, legal defense and assistance for international student workers.

The UAW apparatus does not function as an instrument of working class struggle. It operates as an agency of labor management and a police force over the rank and file, isolating struggles and shutting down strikes in order to defend its own material privileges and its integration with university administrations and the capitalist state. Within HGSU-UAW, this role is masked by the radical rhetoric and pseudo-left credentials of leading officials.

HGSU-UAW Vice President Evan Lemire is a member of the DSA. He ran for membership of the Boston DSA Steering Committee in 2018.

At the end of May, Lemire played a central role in sabotaging the 40-day strike by introducing the motion at an all-membership meeting to end it before management had agreed to any concessions on wages and benefits. Lemire defended the capitulation, declaring, “Harvard has indicated in a way that they haven’t before that they’re willing to move on some of our key issues.”

Brandon Mancilla, a prominent DSA member, launched his career in the UAW bureaucracy as HGSU-UAW’s founding president and now draws \$233,450 as director of UAW Region 9A. He shut down Harvard’s 2021 strike after three days to push through a sellout contract, and when Columbia graduate workers voted 91.5 percent to strike, Region 9A forced them to drop demands to end campus surveillance and remove police from campus, threatening receivership if they refused.

The apparatus’s strategy of isolating workers was demonstrated on April 20, 2026, one day before the HGSU strike began. Non-tenure-track faculty and researchers in Harvard Academic Workers (HAW-UAW) voted by a 53 percent majority at an all-membership meeting to close their strike authorization vote and strike immediately alongside the graduate workers. A combined strike of 8,000 academic workers would have shut down Harvard entirely.

To prevent this, the HAW-UAW bargaining committee and Region 9A unilaterally canceled the strike. Citing “procedural confusions” and “frustrations over the notification window,” they overrode a democratic mandate from the membership and ruled out any strike for the remainder of the semester. The HAW has since authorized a strike following a 94 percent vote in July, with Lemire talking about “a real possibility of a joint strike,” according to *Harvard Magazine*.

These betrayals are the direct application of the DSA’s “rank-and-file strategy,” which encourages young activists and graduate students to seek elected and staff positions in the unions under the pretense of “reforming” the union bureaucracy from within. It does not challenge the anti-working-class role of the apparatus or call for workers to build independent organs of workers’ power. In practice, it elevates pseudo-left careerists into the union apparatus

with six-figure salaried positions, where their function is to defend the interests of the bureaucracy against the membership.

Crucially, the DSA, as a faction of the Democratic Party, rules out any break with the capitalist, pro-war party, whose representatives dominate Harvard’s governing boards and the state government. Its personnel channel worker discontent back into capitalist politics, using radical phraseology to win the trust of militant workers, only to enforce strike shutdowns and keep decision-making in the hands of Region 9A and the UAW International.

Graduate workers must take the conduct of this struggle out of the bureaucracy’s hands and build new organizations that they democratically control. A strike vote must not become another blank check for Region 9A to negotiate away core demands behind closed doors.

A rank-and-file committee must unite graduate workers across all Harvard campuses (Cambridge, Longwood, Allston), departments and professional schools, including non-union graduate workers, master’s student workers and hourly student workers. It must enforce rank-and-file control over all bargaining and strike decisions, with all negotiating sessions open to the entire membership and no closed-door sessions between UAW representatives and Harvard’s lawyers.

The committee must build direct links with non-tenure-track faculty at Harvard, graduate workers at Columbia and academic workers across the University of California system (UAW Local 4811), where the UAW bureaucracy kept 40,000 workers on the job after their contract expired on March 1, 2026, in defiance of a 93.3 percent strike vote.

The rank-and-file socialist candidate for UAW president Will Lehman has argued that real power resides in the workers in the laboratories and in the classrooms, not in the offices of Region 9A or the executive suites of the Harvard Corporation. In a statement issued at the beginning of the 40-day strike, Lehman said:

“The decisive question is how to expand and unify your strike. You are not alone. Autoworkers, logistics workers, healthcare workers, teachers and others are all facing the same basic issues: falling real wages, job insecurity, speedup, and the threat of war and dictatorship.”

The outcome of the coming struggle depends on the independent initiative of graduate workers to organize a winning strategy now. Reject the bureaucratic apparatus, break with the pseudo-left managers of surrender, and build the Harvard Graduate Workers Rank-and-File Committee as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact