Harvard graduate workers enter second week of strike: University stalls as UAW apparatus isolates struggle

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More than 4,000 graduate student workers at Harvard University are in the second week of a strike that began Tuesday, October 27, their second walkout this year. Members of the Harvard Graduate Students Union-United Auto Workers (HGSU-UAW, Local 5118) have been without a contract since June 2025. The union leadership ended their 40-day strike last spring, the longest in the union's history, on June 1 without a contract.

Strikers' demands include wages and benefits that keep pace with the cost of living in Greater Boston, protections for international and noncitizen workers and an independent process for complaints of harassment and discrimination.

The strike follows a vote of 88 percent last month to authorize a walkout. Workers again confront an administration sitting on an endowment of nearly $68 billion. The decisive question is not the militancy of the membership, which has been demonstrated repeatedly, but who controls the struggle.

The potential for a powerful united struggle across Cambridge exists but is being squandered by the UAW bureaucracy. Harvard Academic Workers-UAW (HAW-UAW), which represents non-tenure-track faculty and researchers who voted 94 percent in July to authorize a strike, has announced it will walk out November 10 unless it reaches an agreement. At MIT, the 3,000-member Graduate Student Union (UE Local 256) has set a strike date of November 12. Harvard's nearly 900 dining workers, members of UNITE HERE Local 26, voted last month to authorize a strike but have set no date.

Each of these struggles is proceeding on its own timetable under its own bargaining committee. In April, when HAW-UAW members voted at a membership meeting to strike alongside graduate workers, the bargaining committee and UAW Region 9A called the strike off. Region 9A is headed by Brandon Mancilla, the first president of HGSU and a member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA).

HGSU-UAW President Denish Jaswal has declared, "We are prepared to stay on strike until Harvard moves." This is the same hollow sloganeering with which the HGSU leadership ended the spring strike "unconditionally," on the strength of verbal signals from Harvard negotiators that the university was willing to "move" on core issues. Five months later, its position is essentially unchanged.

The university calls the walkout unwarranted and insists it is an "intermittent strike" unprotected by federal labor law, a claim first made in an October 2 letter from its Office of Labor and Employee Relations. The administration has warned strikers they can be disciplined or fired.

The university's wage offer, presented at the October 22 bargaining session, remains a 6.1 percent raise on ratification followed by 3 percent annual increases, which Harvard claims compounds to nearly 16 percent over the life of the contract. With rents and living costs in Cambridge and Boston among the highest in the country, this amounts to a real-terms wage cut for workers who already struggle to make ends meet. HGSU-UAW Vice President Evan Lemire said the university's latest package was substantively no different from its previous proposals.

According to Harvard, the two sides have held 37 formal and nine informal bargaining sessions since March 2025. The first session since the strike began took place only on Thursday, November 5, more than a week into the walkout. The next are not scheduled until November 20, December 3 and December 17. In other words, the university intends to meet with strikers once every two weeks and wait out the strike until the end of the semester.

The HGSU-UAW officials are limiting members to pressuring the administration through appeals to deans, elected officials and public opinion. On Tuesday, November 3, more than 200 strikers rallied outside University Hall and delivered a letter to Graduate School of Arts and Sciences Dean Emma Dench urging the deans to push the university toward a settlement. Harvard Law School professor Nikolas Bowie told the crowd that the day after the previous contract

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expired in June 2025, Harvard removed some 800 workers from the bargaining unit.

Other speakers included Cambridge City Councilor Ayah Al-Zubi, a DSA member; State Representative Mike Connolly; and Ben Ewen-Campen, a HAW-UAW member and longtime DSA-backed Somerville city councilor who was elected to the Massachusetts House as a Democrat the same day.

HGSU-UAW leaders are calling on members to put their faith in the Democratic Party. Having taken control of both houses of Congress in a massive repudiation of Trump, the Democrats have pledged, in the words of House Democratic leader Hakeem Jeffries, to find "bipartisan common ground" with an administration pursuing fascistic policies on immigration, an unprecedented assault on living standards and the drive to war.

A chasm separates the UAW apparatus from the union membership. In the union's 2026 officer elections, only 98,029 ballots were cast out of roughly 1.1 million eligible active and retired members, a turnout of 8.9 percent—lower even than in 2022, which was already the lowest turnout of any national union election in US history. In many cases workers were never informed that an election was taking place.

HGSU-UAW members cast just 53 ballots, about 1 percent of the local's membership and down from 308 in 2022. At Columbia, only 29 ballots were cast out of roughly 3,000 members. Meanwhile, these same workers have repeatedly voted by overwhelming margins to strike.

Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker, was the only candidate for UAW president who challenged the apparatus itself. In September he issued a statement to roughly 100,000 UAW academic workers returning to campus, calling for rank-and-file committees linking university and industrial workers.

After the vote, Lehman issued a statement, "After the UAW election debacle: We must build rank-and-file committees and take power on the shop floor!" He explained that the boycott of the election by more than 90 percent of the membership confirmed that the bureaucracy cannot be reformed and must be replaced by the power of the rank and file.

The DSA, which backed UAW President Shawn Fain, has joined the corporate press in presenting his reelection as a "mandate." At Harvard, DSA members hold leading positions in the union and played a central role in ending the spring strike. Their "rank-and-file strategy" has meant, in practice, defending the apparatus against the members.

Lemire told the *Crimson* last month that "the leverage that we produced in that strike hasn't gone away." But leverage left in the hands of a leadership oriented to the Democratic Party and the UAW apparatus will be bargained away again.

A winning strategy for Harvard academic workers requires the formation of a Harvard Graduate Workers Rank-and-File Committee, democratically controlled by workers themselves. Workers should fight for the following program:

• **Unite all workers** across the Cambridge, Longwood and Allston campuses, including master's students, hourly student workers and the hundreds removed from the bargaining unit in 2025.

• **Take control of bargaining and all strike decisions.** All bargaining sessions must be open to the membership. No closed-door talks, and no end to the strike without a full vote on a written agreement.

• **Prepare a joint struggle** with HAW-UAW, MIT graduate workers and Harvard dining and service workers, and build links with graduate workers at Columbia and UAW Local 4811 at the University of California.

• **Defend international and noncitizen workers** through the mobilization of the working class against ICE and the Trump administration's attacks, not through reliance on the courts or the Democrats.

• **Reject any victimization of strikers.** An attack on one striker is an attack on all.

• **Affiliate with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC)** to link the struggle at Harvard with autoworkers, parts workers and educators fighting the same apparatus and the same employers.

The struggle at Harvard is part of a growing rebellion of workers against the bureaucracies that have suppressed their struggles for decades. Graduate workers who want to take up this fight should contact the WSWS today by filling out the form below.

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