Harvard academic workers join graduate strike amid mounting social conflict after US midterms

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11 November 2026

Hundreds of non-tenure-track faculty and researchers at Harvard University walked off the job Tuesday, joining more than 4,000 graduate students already on strike at the wealthiest university in the world. The expanding walkout is a sign of mounting social and class conflict in the United States, anticipated by the widespread opposition to the Trump administration expressed in last week's midterm elections.

Seven months ago, officials of the United Auto Workers prevented Harvard academic workers from joining a graduate student strike despite a vote by members in favor of walking out together. Graduate workers were left to fight alone for 40 days. But the walkouts by both units now show that the UAW's efforts to isolate these groups are being challenged by the militancy of the rank and file. The critical question is how to develop this into organized control of the struggle by the workers themselves, in order to expand the strike and stay out until they have won their demands.

The conditions for a wider struggle are emerging. At Harvard, nearly 900 dining workers have authorized strike action. At nearby MIT, a union representing more than 3,000 graduate workers voted by 93 percent to authorize a strike beginning November 12, but the union announced a tentative agreement Tuesday evening and postponed the walkout pending ratification.

The strike is disrupting teaching and research at an institution whose endowment has swollen to $68 billion, even as it has cut staffing and resisted demands for higher wages and improved working conditions. The dispute also raises political questions extending well beyond pay, including the university's treatment of immigrant workers and academic freedom amid the Trump administration's attacks on higher education.

On Tuesday, academic workers marched with graduate strikers around the Science Center and through Harvard Yard, chanting, "Harvard messed up, now we're two." Required writing courses and laboratory work were disrupted. Some first-year students received instructions to complete online assignments instead of attending class.

Ian Shank, an Expository Writing instructor earning about $75,000 a year, told the Boston Globe that his classes had grown while his pay stood still. "We're not asking for the moon," he said. Undergraduate Maxuel Tavarez Marcelino, whose instructor joined the picket, directed his frustration at Harvard rather than at the striking instructors.

Nick Colella, a member of Harvard's core research staff, pointed to two years of frozen wages and rising health costs. "Thousands of workers across campus are standing strong together," he said in the union's strike statement. Other workers described the insecurity of teaching and research appointments, including abrupt losses of work when courses are canceled.

Harvard has offered the academic workers a five-year contract with a 3.5 percent initial raise, followed by three annual increases of 3 percent and a final increase of 3.25 percent, plus a one-time 1 percent bonus. The bargaining committee says Harvard withheld a 3 percent raise workers otherwise would have received in July, making the initial offer effectively half a percentage point above that lost increase.

Harvard's endowment grew by $11.1 billion during the fiscal year ending in June, powered in part by returns on stocks, private equity and hedge funds. Its salaries-and-wages bill, meanwhile, fell $104 million, or 3.8 percent, as the university imposed hiring restrictions, reduced positions through attrition and restructured departments. Harvard says much of the endowment is restricted by donors, drawn from the wealthiest and most powerful individuals in the world.

The university has tentatively agreed to end "time caps" that automatically terminated some non-tenure-track appointments after a fixed number of years. But it continues to exclude hundreds of fellowship-funded postdocs from bargaining, arguing they are not employees even when they perform similar research under the same supervisors as salaried colleagues. The academic workers also demand family benefits comparable to those of tenured faculty and enforceable procedures for harassment complaints.

Ashley Scott, an anthropology research associate, criticized Harvard's insistence on handling discrimination and harassment investigations within its own administrative machinery. "The problem is systemic, so accountability has to be independent," she said. Workers whose careers, funding and recommendations depend on senior faculty have a direct stake in independent review.

The graduate strike also directly confronts Trump's attacks on immigrant students and researchers. Graduate workers demand protections against cooperation with Immigration and Customs Enforcement, immigration-related leave and support for workers facing detention or visa problems. Harvard has gone to court

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against federal efforts to restrict international enrollment while resisting contractual guarantees sought by its own employees. At a November 3 rally, Harvard Law School professor Nikolas Bowie pointedly asked why the university would sue Trump over international students but refuse to promise them protection from his agents.

The conflict over academic freedom has sharpened throughout the university. Harvard sanctioned participants in protests against Israel's assault on Gaza and restricted campus demonstrations. In March 2025 it removed the director and associate director of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies from their administrative posts. Faculty critics connected the dismissals to the center's Palestine programming; Harvard disputed that explanation. A report published Tuesday found that the center still has no permanent director. Harvard has meanwhile warned graduate strikers that alleged violations of campus protest rules may result in employment discipline.

Amid these conditions, the HAW-UAW bargaining committee withdrew its proposed academic-freedom article on November 6, just four days before the strike. Its November 8 bargaining update lists "Academic Freedom – WITHDRAWN" among the proposals removed from the table. Earlier versions had sought protections for teaching, research and speech against university censorship or retaliation. The update offers no explanation of the withdrawal or indication that members voted to authorize it.

The graduate workers' bargaining committee had reached a separate tentative agreement on academic freedom in July, but no full agreement has yet been reached.

The strike is pitting workers more and more against the union apparatus. In April, 53 percent of those attending a HAW-UAW membership meeting voted to begin striking alongside graduate workers. The bargaining committee refused, citing procedural confusion and concern that the UAW International would withhold approval. The graduate walkout ended June 1 without a contract. In July, 1,278 academic workers, 93.6 percent of those voting, authorized a strike. Graduate workers walked out again October 27, and the academic workers joined them November 10.

Yet the two groups retain separate bargaining calendars and negotiating committees. Harvard has promised to maintain teaching and research during the stoppages, while its graduate-worker bargaining sessions have been scheduled weeks apart. One instructor reportedly told students that classes might resume Thursday; bargaining committee member Greg Given said no strike length had been predetermined. The decisive questions now are whether workers will determine when they return and whether either group will be sent back without an agreement acceptable to both.

UAW Region 9A, headed by former Harvard graduate union president and Democratic Socialists of America member Brandon Mancilla, helped enforce the separation. Earlier this year the UAW refused strike authorization to Columbia University student workers despite two votes to strike. Region 9A had pressed those workers to narrow political demands, including protections against ICE, an end to campus surveillance and divestment from weapons manufacturers linked to Israel's war in Gaza. Union rallies at Harvard have featured Democratic politicians, including Massachusetts state Representative Mike Connolly, Cambridge City Councilor Ayah Al-Zubi and newly elected state Representative Ben Ewen-Campen, himself a Harvard academic worker.

But such appearances on the picket lines by Democrats are the kiss of death. Under Biden, the administration financed Israel's war in Gaza while the president declared that "order must prevail" as universities moved against anti-genocide protests. Massachusetts Democrat Jake Auchincloss urged Harvard to remove its encampment and said federal funding cuts should be considered over the university's handling of campus protests.

Now, after voters delivered the Democrats majorities in both houses of Congress in a sweeping repudiation of Trump, the party's leaders are preaching restraint. Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer cautioned that voters had not given Democrats a majority to do whatever they wanted. House Democratic leader Hakeem Jeffries declared himself ready to find "bipartisan common ground" with Trump. The contrast between growing social opposition and these calls for moderation is emerging as workers enter into struggle at Harvard and beyond.

The convergence of the Harvard strikes has already broken through an important barrier. Graduate workers, lecturers and researchers should convene joint mass meetings, publish all bargaining proposals and tentative agreements, restore the demand for academic freedom, and insist that no strike end or separate settlement take effect without the informed democratic decision of the membership.

Independent rank-and-file committees, elected and controlled by workers, would provide the means to carry this initiative forward, link the struggles across campuses and defend immigrant and international workers against state attacks. Through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, Harvard workers can connect their fight with broader struggles over wages, jobs and democratic rights.

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