Striking Harvard academic workers should demand: What is the UAW's strategy to win?

International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees
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The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) calls on all workers to support the more than 4,000 Harvard graduate workers on strike since October 27, their second walkout this year, and the non-tenure-track faculty and researchers who walked out for the first time on Tuesday. Both groups are members of the United Auto Workers, organized in HGSU-UAW Local 5118 and Harvard Academic Workers-UAW respectively.

The most urgent question facing strikers is how this strike will be won. Strikers should demand that the UAW answer it.

Academic workers are confronting a university that added $11.1 billion to its endowment last year, bringing it to $68 billion. At the same time, it cut $104 million from salaries and wages. It has frozen academic workers' pay since July 2024, while Boston-area prices rose 7.9 percent, and it now offers about 3 percent a year. Harvard intends to wait workers out and has scheduled bargaining only every two weeks.

The university is governed by a self-selecting board of billionaires and financiers, including Penny Pritzker, the former Commerce Secretary under President Obama, and KKR co-CEO Joseph Bae. That board overruled the faculty in May 2024 to deny degrees to 13 seniors punished for the Gaza encampment. Under pressure from the Trump administration, Harvard removed the leaders of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, tightened rules on speech and protest, and is now threatening strikers with discipline.

The graduate workers' 40-day strike this spring ended without a contract, on the basis of verbal signals from Harvard's negotiators. This fits a pattern in UAW academic strikes:

• **Harvard, 2019:** a 29-day strike ended without a contract.

Columbia, 2021: a spring strike ended without a contract. A second, 10-week strike that fall ended with an agreement that cut real wages.

• **University of California, 2022:** 48,000 workers struck for six weeks. The bargaining team dropped the central demand for a cost-of-living adjustment and settled for a minimum far below the $54,000 workers had demanded.

• **University of California, 2024:** the UAW called off a strike against the repression of Gaza protesters in obedience to a court injunction.

• **The New School, 2024:** The UAW shut down a three-day strike by 500 teaching and research assistants and accepted a deal that fell far short of their demands for improved wages, childcare and protections for international students.

• **Columbia, 2026:** after student workers voted by more than 90 percent to strike, the UAW regional leadership blocked strike action.

The UAW owes strikers an answer: What is its strategy to win this strike? What support will it provide? How is it mobilizing the more than 380,000 members of the union? Which sections of workers in Boston and across the country is it calling on? Why does a strike fund holding nearly $1 billion pay strikers only $550 a week, and only after the first week?

Academic workers, roughly 100,000 members, are now about a quarter of the union. The apparatus headed by UAW President Shawn Fain sees them primarily as a source of dues to replace the income lost from laid-off industrial workers.

A real strategy would start from where the strength to win lies. Harvard can outlast a strike confined to Harvard. It cannot outlast a movement of the working class as a whole, and the conditions for such a movement are emerging.

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At Harvard, dining workers have voted to strike and clerical staff have faced job cuts. Undergraduates and faculty, confronting the same attacks on academic freedom, free speech and the rights of noncitizens, are the strikers' natural allies. Yet on November 6, Harvard Academic Workers withdrew its academic-freedom proposal from bargaining, and it is not among the graduate union's strike demands.

In Boston, 4,000 Brigham and Women's nurses and 3,000 MIT graduate workers were preparing to strike, and opposition is growing to cuts by the Trump administration and Democratic officials, including Mayor Wu.

The midterm elections on November 3 were an overwhelming repudiation of the Trump administration and registered a powerful shift to the left among workers and young people. They portend enormous social struggles, and the strike at Harvard has entered a new stage in their aftermath.

The Democrats who now control Congress have responded by pledging to seek "bipartisan common ground" with Trump. The UAW apparatus campaigned for their election. The Democratic Socialists of America, whose members hold leading positions in UAW Region 9A, which oversees it, work to keep workers tied to the same party.

The IWA-RFC urges strikers to form a rank-and-file strike committee now, uniting graduate and academic workers. Workers should demand:

An immediate mass membership meeting, with an open microphone and no restrictions on discussion, where the UAW must answer these questions and every member is free to raise proposals and put them to a vote.

Strike pay that fully compensates workers, replacing all lost wages from the first day, for every striker.

That all proposals and tentative agreements be published, that bargaining sessions be open to the members, and that no strike be ended without a full vote on a written agreement.

That the demands for academic freedom, free speech and the right to protest be restored, with full protection for noncitizen workers against ICE.

These demands must be bound up with a turn outward. The struggle is being kept divided. Graduate workers, academic workers, clerical staff and dining workers face one employer on separate timetables. The MIT and Brigham strikes, set for November 12, were both called off after tentative agreements, leaving Harvard strikers more isolated.

Strikers should take their fight to every student and faculty member, and unite with the dining workers and clerical staff who face the same employer. They should reach out to nurses, graduate workers and workplaces across Boston, and to UAW members in auto and other industries.

The IWA-RFC was founded to unite workers across workplaces, industries and national borders in a common struggle against the corporations and the bureaucracies that serve them. We will give every assistance to Harvard workers who want to take up this fight.

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