“It’s about class”: Powerful strike by Harvard academic workers collides with the Democratic Party establishment

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The strike by more than 4,000 Harvard graduate student workers, now in its third week, and the first-ever walkout of non-tenure-track faculty and researchers are colliding head-on with the Democratic Party establishment, which oversees the richest university in the world.

Members of the Harvard Graduate Students Union-United Auto Workers (HGSU-UAW) and Harvard Academic Workers-UAW (HAW-UAW) are demanding raises to address skyrocketing living costs, childcare benefits and protections for international students and academic freedom.

The Harvard Corporation, the board that governs the university, presides over an endowment that grew by $11.1 billion last year, a 27 percent increase, to reach $68 billion. It has frozen academic workers’ pay since July 2024, while Boston-area prices rose 7.9 percent. Harvard is now offering striking workers roughly 3 percent a year.

The Harvard Corporation is a veritable who’s who of the corporate-financial oligarchy. Its members include Sylvia Burwell, who held senior White House and budget posts under the Clinton and Obama administrations, in addition to the Bill and Melinda Gates and Walmart Foundations; billionaire Penny Pritzker, who served as US Commerce Secretary in the Obama administration; along with executives from major private equity and hedge funds, including Michael S. Chae, the vice president and chief financial officer at Blackstone, and Joseph Bae, the co-CEO of KKR.

A striking faculty worker explained to the *World Socialist Web Site* how this board is using the crisis. “Harvard has been in this very public fight with the Trump administration and that meant that among other things, they lost some funding from the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health. So basically some senior management at Harvard, working with the McKinsey consulting firm, decided they should make use of this crisis.”

Harvard paid McKinsey at least $250,000 to design cuts at the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, according to documents obtained by the Harvard Crimson. The plan to “cluster” administrative operations could eliminate as many as 25 percent of staff positions. “In some departments, they fired half the non-tenure track faculty,” the worker said. “They didn’t consult any of the professors... These are people [who] do most of the teaching and do a huge amount of research.”

“The cost of living is crazy here in Boston,” a striking graduate student said. “A lot of us are not full time and get something like $2,600 a month. I live with my partner, and we pay $2,600 per month in rent. So it’s more than half my pay.” He also spoke to the persecution of international students: “Everyone knows about ICE, how it got already into the university. The university has been cooperating with them.”

Sasha, another striking graduate student, rejected Harvard’s claim that it has no money. “It just doesn’t look true against the endowment, does it? They’re using political rhetoric as a means to deny economic justice effectively. It’s a real concern insofar as the Democrats here and other cities are using that as an excuse.”

The strike is taking place in the aftermath of the historic electoral defeat of Trump and the Republicans. Having taken control of Congress, the Democrats have pledged to seek “bipartisan common ground” with Trump. “They’re assuming that the status quo needs to be maintained, the striking grad student said. “But clearly we’re not happy with the status quo.”

The same board that has postured as a defender of democracy is implementing Trump’s program on campus. It has fired the directors of centers studying the Middle East, punished undergraduates who protested the Gaza genocide, and rewritten campus rules so that undergraduates can no longer protest without prior authorization.

Harvard is also seeking to strip workers of employee status. The day after the graduate union’s contract expired in June 2025, it removed some 800 workers from the bargaining unit, and it now wants to carve out 300 to 400 stipend post-doctoral researchers. It has spent two years trying to force the union to file a petition that would put the question before Trump’s National Labor Relations Board. The aim is a ruling that would strip stipend post-docs of employee status at every campus where they are organized, including Columbia, Cornell and NYU.

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Demand what the UAW's strategy is to win the strike

In the face of this offensive, the UAW bureaucracy has confined the struggle to two bargaining units on one campus. Harvard has scheduled bargaining only every two weeks, a clear signal that it intends to wait the strikers out until the end of the semester.

The UAW's record in academic strikes is one of isolation and capitulation: Harvard in 2019, Columbia in 2021 and 2026, the University of California in 2022 and 2024, and the New School in 2024. The graduate workers' 40-day strike this spring ended without a contract, on the basis of verbal signals from Harvard's negotiators. Five months later, the university's position is essentially unchanged. The UAW apparatus, headed by President Shawn Fain, with Democratic Socialists of America members holding leading positions in Region 9A, campaigned for the Democrats in the midterms.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) has called on striking workers to demand what the UAW's strategy is to win the strike. This includes:

• 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? In Boston and Cambridge, a one-bedroom apartment rents for $33,000 a year.

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

"It's about class"

"I support a mass meeting," a grad student said. "We need to have a unified strategy that is in line with the members. We need to have in mind what's going to hurt the administration rather than just what they've sort of done in previous semesters or what's been done elsewhere. That's going to mean keeping the strike going at least until grading for this semester and possibly longer if the administration doesn't come to a settlement."

The Harvard strike is part of a growing rebellion against the bureaucracies that have suppressed workers' struggles for decades. The conditions confronting Harvard workers are the same ones facing workers in every industry and country: soaring inequality, austerity imposed in the name of crisis, and attacks on democratic rights. Harvard can outlast a strike confined to Harvard. It cannot outlast a movement of the working class as a whole.

"There are French Revolution levels of inequality. How can there be such an incredible magnitude of wealth and such poverty and mistreatment of others in the same world?" said Sasha, a striking graduate student. Addressing himself to broader sections of workers, he said, "We are all fighting the same fight. Even though our work looks really different at times, it is our labor that makes the rest of the world run."

Another grad student pointed to the resistance of workers and young people across Europe. "Right now, people at Harvard are fighting for their own contracts, but it definitely resonates with some of the struggles that are happening in Europe. because I feel like there is something in the air about, like, Gen Z, rising up and demanding more rights. The future seems a bit dark, and we don't want to be just economic growth, the same as we always were. The goal of capitalism is just for money to grow and grow. We think the important thing is not just for GDP to grow, but just for people to get a good life, and for everyone to be in decent conditions, and not just making rich corporations even richer."

Asked what he would say to UAW members in the auto and other industries about the importance of the Harvard strike, he said, "The most important thing is, is not to take things for granted, that things can always be changed and that workers have power. We actually have all the powers, because without the workers, there's no money. There's no production, and we have the means of production. Therefore, we need to organize bottom up because the politicians are always going to try to be elected, get allies in the system, and do maneuvering. So always remember that the workers have the power and that our unity makes us stronger."



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