Harvard student speaks out as strike enters fourth week: “It’s just really remarkable how poorly treated workers are at this university”

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As the strike by more than 4,000 Harvard graduate student workers enters its fourth week and the first-ever walkout by non-tenure-track faculty and researchers completes its first week, the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with a Harvard master’s student, who has spent the strike talking with workers across campus about their conditions.

“If you just sit down and have that really simple conversation, you ask, ‘What are your working hours? How much do you take home? How much is your rent?’” she said. “It’s just really remarkable how poorly treated workers are at this university. You look around us, and we’re in the midst of such wealth. Sometimes I just walk through these buildings and I wonder, how much did that chair cost? Why is Harvard investing in these things and not in the quality of life of its workers, which are really the basis of critical inquiry here?”

Record endowment, frozen wages

The contrast she describes is a matter of record. Harvard’s endowment grew by $11.1 billion in the last fiscal year to $68 billion, while the university cut $104 million from salaries and wages. Harvard’s graduate workers have gone without a raise since their contract expired in June 2025, and the university withheld the raise non-tenure-track faculty and researchers were due last July.

Over the past year, Boston-area prices rose 3.8 percent, and energy prices 21.7 percent. Harvard’s latest offers are 6.1 percent on ratification and 3 percent a year after that for graduate workers, and 3.5 percent upfront and 15.75 percent over six years for HAW (Harvard Academic Workers) members. Both unions say these offers will not keep up with the cost of living. One graduate student told the WSWS last week that she takes home about $2,600 a month—and pays $1,300 for rent.

Harvard’s endowment windfall came from speculation. The 27.1 percent return, its highest since 2021, was driven by venture capital and, above all, by a $2.2 billion stake in SpaceX, which went public in June in the largest IPO in history, helping make Elon Musk the first trillionaire. One analysis estimated that SpaceX alone added 7.8 percentage points to the return.

Those who manage the money are lavishly rewarded. The six highest-paid executives at Harvard Management Company (HMC), which invests the endowment, took home $26.2 million in 2024, led by CEO N.P. Narvekar, a former JPMorgan derivatives executive, at $6.4 million. HMC’s 113 employees received $89 million in fiscal 2024, an average of about $800,000 each. The pay of those six executives alone equals a quarter of the $104 million Harvard cut from wages. Yet the university has frozen next year’s endowment payout, citing the new federal endowment tax, and tells its workers to accept 3 percent.

The largest strike in Harvard’s history

The Harvard Graduate Students Union-United Auto Workers (HGSU-UAW) walked out on October 27, its second strike this year. On November 10, roughly 2,500 members of Harvard Academic Workers-UAW (HAW-UAW) joined them after more than two years of bargaining without a first contract. Some 6,500 teaching and research employees are now on strike, the largest strike in the university’s history.

Harvard has shown no intention of settling. University officials broke off a November 5 bargaining session with HGSU-UAW, accusing union representatives of “inappropriate, disrespectful remarks.” HGSU-UAW President Denish Jaswal said the university “came with zero proposals.”

On November 10, Paul Curran, managing director of Harvard’s Office of Labor and Employee Relations, asked the graduate union to consider bringing in a mediator. The latest HAW-UAW negotiation session was scheduled for Tuesday, November 17, but there have been no reports from either Harvard or the union. Harvard is meeting with the unions only about every two weeks, a clear signal that it intends to wait the strikers out until the end of the semester.

The administration has threatened strikers with “employment disciplinary action” for picketing that violates university rules. It is also seeking to carve 300 to 400 stipend-funded postdocs out of the HAW-UAW bargaining unit, having already removed some 800 workers from the graduate unit the day after its contract expired in June 2025.

The repression extends to students who support the strikers. Harvard Law School suspended at least 18 students’ physical access to Langdell Library until November 27 after about 40 students held a silent, hourlong “study-in” on November 6 in support of the school’s clinical instructors. The instructors are organized in a separate HAW-UAW unit and have been without a contract for more than two years. The students had displayed signs on their laptops and worn blue badges reading “Students stand with HLS clinicians.” Law Professor Stephen Sachs defended the crackdown, declaring that Harvard’s libraries are “not for providing a captive audience.”

A divided workforce

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The student who spoke to the WSWS belongs to the Harvard Undergraduate Workers Union, which still has no first contract. She agreed with the WSWS that if the strike remains confined to two bargaining units, Harvard, “with its deep pockets,” will try to wear workers down.

“I absolutely agree,” she said. “There are multiple unions on campus that have been striking at different times. It would be great if there was more cooperation between the academic workers unions and the more traditional worker unions here on campus, because that’s what we really need actually, I think, to bring this place to a halt—for all of these units of people who make the university function to really just say, we stand in this together and we are going to shut things down.”

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The potential for exactly such a movement exists. Nearly 900 Harvard University Dining Services workers, members of UNITE HERE Local 26, voted 89 percent in favor of authorizing a strike on October 20 and have been without a contract since June. At nearby MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), more than 3,000 graduate workers voted 93 percent to strike on November 12, and nurses at Brigham and Women’s Hospital were set to walk out the same day.

Instead, the MIT and Brigham strikes were called off after last-minute tentative agreements, while the dining workers remain on the job with no strike date announced. Each struggle has been kept on its own separate timetable.

The student described how this division is built into the structure of employment at Harvard. “The structure is extremely splintered,” she said. “You see this even within the graduate student union. Research assistants and TFs make different rates. So it’s very difficult, because of the way that funding works at this university, to actually get people to act collectively. This has been a strategy by the university, and it’s sad to see that it’s been so effective.”

But the university is not the only force creating divisions. The UAW apparatus has made no appeal to autoworkers, to other campus workers or to the tens of thousands of university and hospital workers across Greater Boston. Meanwhile, with more than 380,000 members and a strike fund of nearly $1 billion, the UAW doles out just $550 a week to strikers, with payments starting only after the first week.

The graduate workers’ 40-day strike this spring was shut down without a contract, on the flimsy basis of “verbal signals” from Harvard’s negotiators. This followed a pattern of isolated and defeated UAW academic strikes at Harvard in 2019, Columbia in 2021 and 2026, the University of California in 2022 and 2024, and the New School in 2024. On November 6, four days before the walkout, the HAW-UAW bargaining committee withdrew its academic freedom proposal from the table without explanation.

A mass meeting: “That would be phenomenal”

Asked what she thought of the call by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) for a mass membership meeting at which workers would demand that the UAW explain its strategy to broaden and win the strike, she replied, “That would be phenomenal.

“Something like a big town hall, where everyone could just come and get involved, would be really wonderful,” she added.

The student was scathing about the gap between Harvard’s self-image and its conduct. “This university constantly says that it supports the democratic principles of this country, that it’s standing up to Trump, that it’s standing up against authoritarianism for democracy,” she said. “But it’s not a very democratic institution in its own structure.

“This university constantly holds events with titles like ‘How can we seek justice in America,’ or ‘Expanding workers’ rights in America’ or ‘Celebrating the history of protest in America,’” she said. “And then when you actually look at the campus rules here, you can’t even put up a poster on a public wall.”

Harvard is run by the Democratic Party establishment and the financial oligarchy it serves. The Harvard Corporation includes Sylvia Burwell, a former budget official in the Clinton and Obama administrations; Penny Pritzker, Obama’s commerce secretary; Michael Chae, chief financial officer of the private equity giant Blackstone; and Joseph Bae, co-CEO of the global investment firm KKR.

The same administration that sued the Trump administration over international enrollment refuses to give its own workers contractual protection against ICE. It has also used federal funding cuts as a pretext to slash jobs, paying the consulting firm McKinsey & Company at least $250,000 to design cuts in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences.

The HMC board that approves its executives’ pay is drawn from the same layer. Alongside Blackstone’s chief financial officer, it includes Raymond McGuire, president of Lazard; the co-CEO of the investment firm Canyon Partners; and a managing partner of the private equity firm Advent International.

Asked whether the conflict at Harvard is a microcosm of what is happening to workers nationally, with Democrats talking about “affordability” while refusing to provide workers an affordable standard of living, she agreed. “That’s what you see on behalf of the liberal elite in this country right now,” she said. “This university is mistreating its own workers, systematically, and it’s refusing to provide economic justice for people. And I think that is really a much broader divide in this country right now, within the Democratic Party and beyond it. You see people who are very vocally committed to liberal social values, but they have a broader economic view that really just supports the perpetuation and the reproduction of the current economic system—of the process of financialization and fracturing that has deeply, deeply undermined the power of the working class in this country and that has led to widening, yawning economic inequality.”

After the Democrats’ landslide in the November 3 midterm elections, which registered deep popular hostility to the Trump administration, the Democratic leadership responded by pledging to find “bipartisan common ground” with Trump. The UAW campaigned for the Democrats, and members of the Democratic Socialists of America, a faction of the Democratic Party, hold leading positions in UAW Region 9A and in the Harvard unions.

The student said she had initially hoped for a liberal leadership “that truly cares about the people.” Asked about the working class fighting for political power itself, rather than looking to a faction of the financial elite, she said: “I agree with you that asking the elite that are already in power to better represent us is probably not going to work out that well. And so I’m very excited to start thinking and learning more about how workers themselves can get organized.”

Harvard can outlast a strike confined to Harvard

The struggle at Harvard is part of a growing international movement of the working class, from the mass demonstrations and general strikes by

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workers and youth in France, Spain and Italy against austerity and war spending to mounting protests across Latin America.

The great danger is that the strike at Harvard remains isolated. With its massive resources, Harvard can outlast a strike confined to Harvard. It cannot outlast a movement of the working class as a whole.

To build that movement, workers must take the conduct of the strike into their own hands. Graduate and academic workers should form a rank-and-file strike committee and demand an immediate mass membership meeting, with an open microphone and no restrictions on discussion, at which the UAW must answer: What is your strategy to win? How are you mobilizing your 380,000 members? Which workers in Boston and nationally are you calling on? And why does a strike fund holding nearly $1 billion pay strikers only $550 a week?

Strikers should demand full strike pay from day one, the publication of all proposals and tentative agreements, the restoration of the academic freedom demand, and a full membership vote on a written agreement before any strike ends.

Above all, the strike must turn outward: to Harvard's dining workers, to undergraduate student workers, to clerical staff and nurses, to workers across Boston and to UAW members in auto and other industries.

Harvard graduate and academic workers who want to take up this fight should contact the WSWS today.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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