UAW ends Harvard academic workers' walkout without a contract, leaving graduate strikers isolated

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Harvard Academic Workers-United Auto Workers (HAW-UAW) ended its first-ever strike Wednesday after just one week, sending some 2,600 non-tenure-track lecturers, preceptors and postdoctoral researchers back to work without a contract. The HAW bargaining committee said it recommended its members "conclude the strike" and return to work Wednesday after Harvard had agreed to "double" its wage offer and "expand childcare."

The bargaining committee said its members had voted by 85 percent to return to work. Although claiming that "substantial issues are largely settled," it admitted it would take "several weeks" to "sort out final details of contract language" before a tentative agreement could be brought to the membership for a vote.

The end of the return to work leaves more than 4,000 members of the Harvard Graduate Students Union (HGSU-UAW, Local 5118), on strike since October 27, out on a limb by themselves. This betrayal takes place as Harvard's high-powered attorneys threaten to take disciplinary action against striking workers for allegedly disruptive picketing.

"HAW's decision to end the strike without coordination with HGSU leaves graduate students isolated, and is immoral," one HAW member told the *World Socialist Web Site.* "Some of those students are paid only $27,000 a year for full time work, in a town where housing alone costs more. Harvard has eight or more unions, and not one of their senior leaderships are helping to coordinate strike action or bargaining to support any part of Harvard's workforce," he said.

Several sources in the HAW and HGSU, he told the WSWS, said the agreement between Harvard lawyers and HAW bargainers was made to end the strike despite HGSU's appeal that the HAW and HGSU reach agreements in tandem. "Some HAW members spoke out against the exclusion of stippendees, and protections against harassment, from the settlement."

This is the second time this year that the UAW apparatus has kept the university's academic workers from waging a united fight. In April, the HAW-UAW bargaining committee overrode a membership vote to strike alongside graduate workers, who then fought alone for 40 days. The spring strike ended June 1 without a contract.

The decision to sabotage the strike cannot be attributed solely to the local HAW leaders. There is no doubt that UAW International President Shawn Fain and Region 9A Director Brandon Mancilla, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America, have been pressing to end the walkout as soon as possible. After expending vast resources on the election of Democrats in the midterm elections, the last thing the UAW apparatus wants is a unified strike by Harvard workers, which could become the catalyst for a broader struggle by academic workers nationally. This includes MIT, New York University, Columbia, the New School and other universities, which, like Harvard, are essentially run by the Democratic Party establishment.

What Harvard offered

According to the *Crimson*, Harvard raised its offer before Tuesday's vote to a 7 percent across-the-board raise on ratification, up from 3.5 percent a week earlier, plus a one-time 1.5 percent bonus. HAW bargaining committee member Given said the package contained only minor changes to family and health benefits and no movement on anything else. He called it "a significant enough improvement to call off the strike," but "not good enough to settle yet."

In a letter to faculty Wednesday, Harvard spelled out its new offer: a 7 percent raise "upon ratification," followed by raises of 3.25 percent in each of the next three fiscal years, and a one-time 1.5 percent bonus paid on ratification. The minimum salary for lecturers and preceptors would rise to $75,000. According to MIT's Living Wage Calculator, two working parents have to earn $173,466 annually to raise a family of four in the Boston-Cambridge area.

Harvard's letter says nothing about back pay or the 3 percent raise Harvard withheld in July. Academic workers have had no raise since July 2024. Under the offer, they still get nothing until they ratify a contract, which could be months away. The raise must be measured against what workers have lost and the cost of living in the Boston area where prices have risen 7.9 percent.

Everything else remains unresolved. Harvard rejected the union's compromise proposal that harassment and discrimination complaints could end in arbitration, insisting they stay within university procedures. It still refuses to include hundreds of stipend-funded postdoctoral researchers, whom it says are not employees, a carve-out that mirrors its removal of some 800 workers from the HGSU-UAW unit in June 2025. Harvard is looking to Trump's National Labor Relations Board to issue a precedent-setting ruling that would strip such workers of union rights not only at Harvard but throughout the country.

Harvard used Trump's 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. Nothing in the report suggests the strike won any protection against this, under which, as the WSWS has reported, some departments have already fired half their non-tenure-track faculty. The academic freedom proposal had already been dropped by the bargaining committee on November 6.

The issue the HAW identified as the reason the package is "not yet a deal" is union security, which would require covered workers to pay dues

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or an association fee. Harvard claims workers “should be able to decide for themselves.” Harvard is no doubt pressing this issue to weaken the already scattered unionizing efforts. But it is significant that the one issue the UAW apparatus treats as fundamental is the guarantee of dues income, while wages, the harassment process and the excluded postdocs are left to “more bargaining.”

For the UAW International, which has overseen a decline of union membership from 1.5 million in 1979 to less than 400,000 today, the dues money coming from academic workers—who now make up nearly a quarter of the membership—is a critical source of income. At the same time, the UAW limits strike pay to the starvation level of $550 a week out of a strike fund of nearly $1 billion, which is largely used for investments and padding the salaries of corrupt union bureaucrats.

The next HAW-UAW bargaining session is not until December 1. Workers have returned to work under exactly the timetable the WSWS warned against, when we warned that Harvard meets with the unions every two weeks and was waiting to wear down the strikers. Members were forced to give up their only leverage, the strike, for an offer their own negotiators say is unacceptable, with no written agreement to vote on.

The brevity of the strike was signaled from the start. On its first day, a History and Literature lecturer told students there was a high chance classes would resume that Thursday, while HAW officials said no strike length had been predetermined. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) urged strikers to demand a mass membership meeting and to insist that no strike end without a vote on a written agreement. Instead, the strike was ended on an offer, not an agreement.

What this means for graduate strikers

For HGSU members, the return to work of HAW-UAW is a serious blow. Lecturers and preceptors teach many of the sections and courses graduate workers have walked out of. With them back in the classroom, Harvard will seek to cover the teaching and grading of strikers as the semester heads toward final exams.

HAW-UAW says it will “stand in solidarity” by encouraging members to join HGSU picket lines, refraining from doing graduate workers’ work and attending rallies. This is left to the individual conscience of workers. HAW members who refuse to do work usually done by HGSU members will face pressure from department chairs and course heads. They need to organize collectively, together with graduate workers, to enforce that refusal.

The graduate strikers now face Harvard alone, just as they did in the spring. Their next bargaining session is November 20, followed by December 3 and December 17. Harvard has threatened strikers with employment discipline over alleged protest-rule violations.

Grad students should take a warning from the statements of HGSU-UAW President Denish Jaswal who declared, “We are prepared to stay on strike until Harvard moves.” Harvard moved for HAW-UAW by a few percentage points on wages, and the strike ended. The same could happen to graduate workers: a wage increase, while protections for noncitizen workers against ICE, an independent harassment process and the restoration of the 800 workers cut from the unit are pushed off into further talks, and the strike is ended without a contract a second time.

This is the pattern of UAW academic strikes: Harvard in 2019, Columbia in 2021, the University of California in 2022 and 2024, the New School in 2024, and Harvard again this spring. At every step this year the struggles at Harvard and elsewhere have been isolated. The Harvard clerical union leadership pushed through a deal on the eve of the spring graduate strike. The strikes by MIT graduate workers and Brigham and Women’s nurses set for November 12 were called off after tentative agreements. Harvard’s nearly 900 dining workers have authorized a strike but have no date. Now the academic workers have been sent back.

As the WSWS explained last week, the strikers face a Harvard Corporation stacked with Democratic Party figures and Wall Street financiers, including former Obama cabinet secretary Penny Pritzker, Blackstone CFO Michael Chae and KKR co-CEO Joseph Bae. “Harvard can outlast a strike confined to Harvard,” the WSWS wrote. “It cannot outlast a movement of the working class as a whole.”

There continues to be enormous potential for a real struggle. But this requires the development of new forms of organization, rank-and-file committees, which are independent and opposed to the UAW apparatus and fight for what workers need not what Democratic Party politicians, hedge fund managers and union bureaucrats claim is affordable.

What is needed

The WSWS urges HGSU members to demand:

• An immediate mass membership meeting, open to all strikers, with open discussion and votes on strategy. Demand the UAW answer what resources it will provide to win the strike.

• No end to the strike and no return to work without the full text of a written agreement given to members well before a vote.

• Strike benefits to make up for all lost wages and benefits.

• Enforceable protections for noncitizen workers against ICE, an independent harassment and discrimination process, wages that keep pace with Boston’s cost of living, and the restoration of all workers removed from the unit, together with the inclusion of stipend-funded postdocs.

• The restoration of demands for academic freedom, free speech and the right to protest.

HAW-UAW members should refuse all struck work and demand that their own union’s bargaining be reopened to members, with no settlement that leaves graduate workers isolated. Both groups should turn to dining and clerical workers facing the same employer, to graduate workers and nurses across Boston, and to UAW members in auto and other industries.

This requires a joint rank-and-file committee of graduate and academic workers, independent of the UAW apparatus and both big-business parties, linked to the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. Fill out the form below to get involved.

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