Harvard graduate strike enters fifth week, after UAW sends faculty back without a contract

Workers must appeal to campuses across Boston and Cambridge

Mike Ingram
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More than 4,000 members of the Harvard Graduate Students Union (HGSU-UAW, Local 5118) will enter the fifth week of their strike this Tuesday. This is their second strike this year, and have now been without a contract for 17 months.

On Tuesday the union and the university will hold their second session with a mediator. The first took place on Friday, and nothing has been reported from it. The two sides agreed to mediation after the November 17 bargaining session, which, according to HGSU-UAW President Denish Jaswal, "did not yield much agreement." Further mediated sessions may be held next week.

The turn to mediation follows the return to work of Harvard Academic Workers-UAW (HAW-UAW). The UAW ended the strike by some 2,600 lecturers, preceptors and postdoctoral researchers after one week and without a contract. They returned to work based on an offer of a 7 percent raise and a 1.5 percent bonus on ratification, followed by 3.5 percent in each of the next three years. Their own negotiators said the offer was not good enough to settle. HAW's next bargaining session is not until December 1.

The graduate workers are fighting for wages that cover Boston-area living costs, protections for noncitizen workers against ICE, an independent process for harassment and discrimination complaints, and the restoration of hundreds of workers Harvard has removed from the bargaining unit.

Meanwhile, Harvard is turning up the pressure on strikers. In letters on November 4 and November 6, the university's labor relations chief Paul Curran accused the union of disrupting a midterm exam, blocking building entrances and banging on doors during a rally at University Hall. He said the university was reviewing each incident. The university is also in a dispute with the union over whether strikers must report the hours they have not worked. The UAW, which sits on a strike fund of nearly $1 billion, pays strikers $550 a week, and only beginning the second week.

Harvard, with an endowment of about $68 billion, is hoping to bide its time. It is governed by Harvard Corporation, which includes former Obama cabinet secretary Penny Pritzker, Blackstone CFO Michael Chae and KKR co-CEO Joseph Bae.

As for mediation, Harvard proposed federal mediators during HGSU's first strike in December 2019, and that strike was ended weeks later without a contract. The graduate workers' own experience this year is that every pause in the struggle has been used to wear them down. After the spring strike ended on June 1 without a contract, Harvard met the union every two weeks. In the meantime, the university withheld raises and carried out its McKinsey-designed restructuring of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences.

The strike's real strength lies outside the Harvard bargaining room. Across Boston and Cambridge, tens of thousands of workers at other universities face the same conditions and are being held back by union bureaucracy. Acting upon this potential, including uniting with faculty at Harvard and re-establishing a joint struggle, requires graduate students organize themselves into rank-and-file committees, independent of the union apparatus.

Two miles away at MIT, 92.5 percent of graduate workers voted in October to strike alongside about 600 facilities workers in 32BJ SEIU, and more than 1,400 undergraduates pledged to stay out of class. But days before the November 12 strike date, the leadership of the MIT Graduate Student Union (UE Local 256) reached a tentative agreement for graduate workers alone, and members ratified it. The deal gives raises of 3.5 percent this year and 3.25 percent in each of the next two years, against the 6 percent the union had called for this year. The union had proposed a $350,000 immigration legal fund and got $60,000 a year for some 1,200 international workers. A ban on ICE from campus

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does not appear in any published summary of the deal.

The MIT facilities workers, who voted by more than 98 percent to strike, are still working without a contract. MIT had offered them one year at 2.2 percent. They are exactly the kind of workers graduate strikers at Harvard should be reaching out to.

At Harvard itself, nearly 900 dining workers in UNITE HERE Local 26 have authorized a strike but have no date. At Boston University, about 300 full-time lecturers in SEIU Local 509 voted by nearly 99 percent on November 17 to authorize a strike, after 18 months of bargaining. BU's graduate workers struck for nearly seven months in 2024. Shortly after, BU suspended admissions to a dozen PhD programs. At Northeastern, about 3,000 graduate workers in GENU-UAW still have no first contract, nearly three years after recognition of their union.

On Friday, about 700 workers from the state's public universities, state universities and community colleges, according to organizers, rallied at the State House under the "Fair Wages Now!" campaign. Their demands are a 30 percent raise over three years and wages that meet the MIT Living Wage Calculator standard, and they are entirely justified.

Workers described holding three jobs and spending half a salary on childcare. But the campaign's aim is to persuade Democratic Governor Maura Healey and the Democratic-controlled Legislature. The state's response was a promise of a wage equity "study" next spring. State law bars public employees from striking, and the unions accept the ban.

The UAW, SEIU, UE, UNITE HERE and the Massachusetts Teachers Association all bargain unit by unit and campus by campus. Every one of them is tied to the Democratic Party, which runs Boston, Cambridge and the state government. In April, the HAW-UAW bargaining committee overrode a membership vote to strike alongside graduate workers. This month the UAW sent HAW back on its own. At MIT, a joint strike of graduate and facilities workers was called off for a deal covering one group. In each case the employer has faced its workers one group at a time.

The union leaderships do nothing to mobilize joint strike action. They bring workers together only for rallies appealing to Democratic politicians. At an inter-union rally on Harvard's Science Center Plaza last Wednesday, HAW members were urged to "stand in solidarity" with the graduate strikers, a day after their own strike was ended. The union officials convert these events into platform for Democratic politicians, who are cutting budgets in Boston and, since the midterms, pledging to find common ground with Trump in Washington.

The graduate strikers cannot wait for the mediator, or the apparatus, to decide their fate. They should take the strike directly to the workers who face the same conditions: MIT facilities workers, BU lecturers, Harvard dining and clerical workers, Northeastern graduate workers, public university workers across the state, and nurses and hospital workers in Boston's Longwood area. Strikers should send delegations to these campuses and workplaces, explain what is at stake and call for joint action.

To do this, HGSU members need to take control of the strike through a rank-and-file strike committee, independent of the UAW apparatus and both big-business parties. As the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) has urged, such a committee should fight for:

- An immediate open mass membership meeting to discuss and vote on strategy, including the mediation process.
- No end to the strike without the full text of a written agreement given to members well before a vote.
- Full strike pay from the first day, from the UAW's nearly $1 billion strike fund.
- 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.
- Joint action with HAW-UAW members, Harvard dining and clerical workers, MIT facilities workers and university workers across Boston and Cambridge, and the right of public sector workers to strike.

Rank-and-file committees should be built at every campus and linked through the IWA-RFC, with each other and with academic workers at Columbia, the University of California and elsewhere. The union apparatus has broken up these struggles one by one. Workers can unite them. Fill out the form below to get involved.

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