



HARVARD GRADUATE STUDENTS UNION

HGSU-UAW Local 5118 | a union of student workers at Harvard University

UNDER EMBARGO UNTIL APRIL 21, 2026, 6:00 AM EST

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Harvard Students on Strike after University Stymies Contract Negotiations

Student Workers Halt Teaching and Research, Seek Protections for Non-Citizen Students, Real Recourse for Harassment and Discrimination, and a Living Wage

CAMBRIDGE, MASS. -- After 14 months of contract negotiations and nearly a year without an active contract, over 4,000 workers represented by the Harvard Graduate Students Union (HGSU-UAW Local 5118) launched a strike of indefinite length today. This move follows a strike authorization vote in which 79% of the union's voting-eligible members participated, with 96% voting in favor. Graduate student workers will suspend teaching and research labor until Harvard's bargaining team takes substantive action in addressing the union's key issues: pay that keeps pace with the rising cost of living, recourse for harassment and discrimination, support for non-citizen students, protections for academic freedom, and "fair share fees" to equitably distribute the expenses of union representation, among others.

"We tried to have faith in the bargaining process, but, after 14 months, it has become clear that our only option is to strike," said Evan Lemire, PhD Candidate in Population Health Sciences and union Executive Board member. "Our work is not sustainable and our community is not safe without the protections we are advocating for. Harvard must understand that the university is built on our labor, and that labor is not guaranteed."

Suspended work includes, but is not limited to, classroom teaching, grading, mentorship, and laboratory research. This labor is what sustains Harvard's academic mission, and it is driven by workers whose careers and livelihoods depend on a fair contract. Graduate student workers depend on the income and benefits they receive from Harvard to afford housing, childcare, student loan payments, and other basic living expenses. To this end, HGSU-UAW has proposed a "pay equity" compensation model which would ensure that every graduate student worker, regardless of their academic discipline or their stage in their PhD program, can make a living wage of \$55,000/year with yearly inflation-adjusted raises. The union has further proposed increasing the minimum wage for hourly workers from \$21/hour to \$25/hour.

HGSU-UAW is also bargaining for improved workplace conditions that allow graduate student workers to contribute to the university's mission without fear of harassment or retaliation. Under

the current system, graduate students filing claims of workplace harassment and discrimination can only seek recourse through internal processes, leaving the university as the sole arbiter of its own conduct. HGSU-UAW has proposed optional grievance processes in which claims can be adjudicated by third-party arbitrators selected jointly by the university and the union. Such protections are standard among graduate student worker contracts at comparable institutions (e.g., NYU, UPenn, MIT, University of California, Stanford).

Denish Jaswal, a PhD Candidate in Philosophy and Bargaining Committee member emphasized, “Our data indicates that 1 in 5 student workers experience harassment, discrimination, and bullying during their time here—that’s hundreds of workers. Legal representation to navigate University processes can cost over \$40,000 for a single case, more than many workers make in a year. Harvard’s processes are costly, traumatizing, and rarely lead to justice for survivors at their outcome.”

Claire Traweek, a PhD student in Materials Science & Mechanical Engineering, shared why this process of real recourse is so important for student workers: “When I told my advisor about the ongoing sexual harassment I had been experiencing in lab, he told my accusers I had tried to report them and then effectively fired me by refusing to sign my advising agreement.” As Traweek navigated this situation, she received limited support from Harvard’s internal processes. “Despite ongoing harassment, Title IX and department staff ignored my emails and pleas for supportive measures. Faculty in my department expressed that they felt the situation was unfair but did not know what to do,” Traweek said. “In fact, throughout the entire process, the union was the only organization that provided meaningful support. We need to add protections against harassment, discrimination, and retaliation to our contract to ensure that this doesn’t happen again.”

HGSU-UAW is also seeking expanded protections for non-citizen student workers including paid leave for immigration-related government appointments and increased funding for legal representation in response to the heightened risk of detention and deportation of non-citizen students. Emma Lezberg, a PhD student in Education whose research focuses on the experiences of non-citizen students, spoke about her disappointment with Harvard’s response to attacks by the federal government on non-citizen students. She described the urgency of codifying protections in the student worker contract: “I have watched colleagues take on double what is considered a ‘full’ teaching load by the university to afford tens of thousands of dollars in attorney fees for family members. I have seen colleagues struggle without guaranteed time off to attend immigration appointments or respond to detention-related emergencies, reliant on the generosity of individual professors in making accommodations for their lab and teaching duties. I have spoken to many dozens of student workers worried that ICE may be allowed on campus without a judicial warrant, given Harvard's unwillingness to guarantee even this most basic of protections in line with federal law.”

HGSU-UAW is also proposing a change to the union’s membership structure that would require all student workers at Harvard to either join the union or to pay a “fair share fee” in exchange for

the union's contract bargaining and enforcement. This change would put HGSU-UAW's membership structure on par with all the other workers' unions at Harvard and would help ensure that the union has adequate resources to enforce the terms of the student worker contract. This enforcement is both essential and costly; arbitration, for example to support a student worker in recovering missing pay, can cost over \$10,000 in administrative and legal fees. Brianna Alderman, a PhD student in Economics, noted, "Fighting a multi-billion-dollar university isn't cheap."

In an open email to the Harvard community last Friday, Sara Speller and Sudipta Saha, President and Vice President of HGSU-UAW, respectively, elaborated on the necessity of contractually enshrining rights and protections for student workers: "We do not take the decision to strike lightly. We are here because we love the teaching and research we do, and many of us want to make it our life's work. However, we cannot do world-class teaching when we cannot afford rent or childcare and are afraid of being harassed or detained on the job." Many within the Harvard community are supportive of this position, in spite of the disruption that it will cause to the operations of the university. Over 250 undergraduate students and more than 50 faculty members have signed on to a petition which began circulating late last week in support of the striking workers.

HGSU-UAW began negotiations with Harvard for a new contract in March 2025. Despite spending more than 65 hours negotiating these proposals across 23 bargaining sessions, Harvard has shown little willingness to compromise on, and in some cases even acknowledge, HGSU-UAW's proposals. It took Harvard's bargaining team nine months to respond to the union's proposals on non-citizen student workers protections. This response rejected all of the union's proposals without offering any alternatives.

HGSU-UAW's previous contract expired in June 2025, leaving graduate student workers without access to active benefits and protections for nearly a year while negotiations have dragged on. "What has made this process particularly challenging is that we have not had a contract for this entire academic year," said Mai-Han Trinh, a PhD candidate in Epidemiology. "That means that we have not been able to access the benefit funds in our contract for things like childcare or medical expenses. I have friends who delayed surgeries in the fall, hoping that we'd have a contract and benefits again soon. But now, here we are in the spring, and we are still at the bargaining table, waiting on Harvard to take us seriously."

As of Sunday evening, there were still 23 unresolved proposals for contract articles, including 9 proposals to which Harvard had offered no response.

About HGSU-UAW Local 5118

The Harvard Graduate Students Union - United Auto Workers (HGSU-UAW Local 5118) represents over 4,000 student workers across Harvard University's 13 schools in their capacity as teachers and researchers. Harvard student workers from all departments joined together in April 2018 to form HGSU-UAW. They are fighting for equitable pay to keep up with the rising

cost of living, legal and financial support for non-citizen student workers, protections from harassment and discrimination, and “fair share fees” to equitably distribute the expenses of union representation.

About UAW

The International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America (UAW) is one of the largest and most diverse unions in North America, with members in virtually every sector of the economy. UAW-represented workplaces range from multinational corporations, small manufacturers and state and local governments to colleges and universities, hospitals and private non-profit organizations. The UAW has more than 400,000 active members and more than 580,000 retired members in the United States, Canada and Puerto Rico. The UAW represents roughly 100,000 higher education workers nationally, including university staff, postdoctoral researchers, adjunct professors, and graduate student workers.

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