



HARVARD GRADUATE STUDENTS UNION

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

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Harvard Graduate Student Union to Picket Commencement Unless University Moves on Contract Negotiations

After One Month on Strike, HGSU-UAW Will Picket at Harvard's Commencement Ceremonies Amid Stalled Progress in Negotiations on Non-Citizen Protections, Real Recourse, and Living Wage

CAMBRIDGE, MASS. – One month into its indefinite strike, the Harvard Graduate Students Union (HGSU-UAW Local 5118) announced today that its members will bring its picket line to Harvard's Commencement Ceremony as the university continues to refuse progress on a contract package that addresses the union's key issues.

Over 4,000 student workers represented by HGSU-UAW have been on strike since April 21st, 2026, following 15 months of contract negotiations with the university. Bargaining since the strike began has been limited to two previously scheduled sessions and one additional date secured at the union's request, as the university has declined to meet more frequently. To date, Harvard has shown no movement regarding the union's core demands: avenues for real recourse for claims of harassment and discrimination, contractual protections for non-citizen and disabled workers, pay equity between research assistants and teaching fellows, and wages commensurate with peer institutions and the local cost of living. As a result, HGSU-UAW plans to picket Harvard's Commencement exercises on May 26th through 28th unless meaningful progress is reached at the bargaining table before then.

Harvard's latest package proposal to the Union offers a contract worse than the contract ratified by the union in 2021. Proposals offered by the university since the strike began sought to eliminate pre-existing benefit funds for healthcare, childcare, and emergency expenses that have been administered by HGSU-UAW since 2020 under contractual agreement. In addition, Harvard has proposed removing protections for discrimination from the union's prior contract and has declined to extend independent arbitration rights already afforded to other Harvard unions, insisting that Harvard should remain the sole investigator of its own conduct in claims raised by student workers. The university has also refused to strengthen protections for non-citizen workers, including paid leave for immigration proceedings and restrictions on immigration enforcement access to private campus spaces without a valid judicial warrant.

“We’re asking for really basic protections here,” said Erin Burman, PhD Candidate in Population Health Sciences. “These are things that graduate workers at Yale, MIT, the UC system, NYU, UPenn, Stanford, and more have won in their contracts. Harvard has yet to explain why they can’t do the same to protect their workers, and we’re prepared to keep withholding labor until we receive a common-sense contract.”

The University’s sole movement on the Union’s stated priorities has been a 1% increase to its total proposed raise over four years, amending 10% to 11%, or an average of 2.75% per year. By 2029, after four years of raises under this proposal, teaching fellows would still earn less than \$30,000 annually and research assistants less than \$55,000. In advancing proposals that would leave graduate students with fewer rights and protections than their prior contract, the university’s bargaining team has demonstrated its disregard for the laborers that sustain Harvard’s research and teaching missions.

Lindsey Adams, a Ph.D Candidate in Virology and Bargaining Committee Member said, “Harvard is making a mockery of our issues in negotiations. During our last bargaining meeting, we asked why our teaching fellows are paid nearly 60% less than teaching fellows at MIT. A top GSAS administrator responded, saying ‘Maybe TFs at MIT work more.’ We want this strike to end, but it’s really difficult to make meaningful progress when the university seems to fundamentally disrespect the work we do.”

As student workers approach one month on strike and one year without a contract, the impact on Harvard’s campus has been significant. Without student workers to support instruction and grade final exams and assignments, classes across the university have struggled to submit final grades before the end of the semester. Research labs at both the Cambridge and Longwood campuses have come to a standstill, impacting Harvard grants.

Workers have not been absent from campus, however. The union has held multiple pickets every weekday at both campuses, with members showing up through pouring rain and 97 degree heat, and drawing support from community members, elected officials, and workers from other Harvard unions. In a further show of solidarity, workers across dozens of vendors have refused to cross HGSU-UAW’s delivery picket lines, resulting in halted or postponed shipments of laboratory equipment, construction material, food services, waste management, and, most recently, preparations for commencement itself.

“It has been remarkable to see the energy and commitment that workers are bringing to the picket line,” said Bailey Plaman, a PhD candidate in Chemical Biology and strike picket captain. “Harvard has had a month to come to the table seriously. If they continue to refuse reasonable negotiations, we will bring this same energy to Commencement activities next week!”

Harvard's 375th Commencement activities will begin on Tuesday, May 26th, and are slated to include public remarks from Conan O'Brien, Boston Mayor Michelle Wu, and former governor Mitt Romney. In turn, HGSU-UAW has invited several public figures to join the picket line and boycott commencement ceremonies in solidarity.

HGSU-UAW recognizes that commencement is a significant milestone for graduating students, many of whom have been members of the union throughout their time at Harvard. "Union protections have made it possible for me to pursue the exciting research and innovative teaching that I came to Harvard to do," said Cana McGhee, who is graduating this year with a PhD in Music. "I am certainly proud of my scholarly and professional accomplishments over the last seven years. But I'm also incredibly proud of the work I've done with my fellow HGSU organizers to ensure that future generations of students have the equitable wages, benefits, and protections that make this work possible."

HGSU-UAW's strike celebrates the individual accomplishments of all student workers and the collective contributions they have made to Harvard's research and teaching missions. Above all, this strike is a fight to ensure that student workers can continue their work with the protections and security they deserve. Harvard works because we do.

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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