

# Harvard grad students to go on strike Tuesday

By [Deirdre Fernandes](#) Globe Staff, Updated December 3, 2019, 12:09 a.m.



CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF/FILE

Thousands of Harvard's graduate student workers are preparing to go on strike Tuesday after failing to reach a contract agreement with university officials on compensation and workplace protections after negotiating for more than a year. The graduate students union [posted on Facebook](#) Monday night that the "indefinite strike begins at midnight tonight. Join us on the picket lines starting [Tuesday] morning at 10 a.m. in Harvard Yard to fight for a better future for all student workers!"

The strike, which would be the first for the Ivy League campus since a dining hall workers action in 2016, threatens to slow many academic functions to a crawl. Because graduate students handle much of the in-person work with students, the university and the union have warned that classes and tutoring sessions may be canceled, moved, or postponed. Students may see delays in getting their grades for papers and tests. And research labs could experience slowdowns.

If the Harvard graduate students strike Tuesday morning, they would join a growing number of laborers across the economy, from grocery store clerks and hotel housekeepers, to teachers and auto workers, who have walked off their jobs to protest wages and working conditions across the country in the past year.

“There’s a nationwide strike wave on,” said Cedric de Leon, an associate professor and director of the Labor Center at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

ADVERTISING



According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, so far this year, more than 419,000 employees have participated in work stoppages, up from 25,000 in 2017.

“We’re in the middle of an upsurge,” de Leon said. “Going out on strike is a serious thing.”

At Harvard, graduate student workers and university officials are at a stalemate over pay packages and grievance procedures for sexual harassment complaints filed by graduate students.

The graduate student workers union is a new bargaining unit at Harvard, negotiating its first contract, and this would be its first strike.

Harvard officials and union representatives said that in a meeting Monday morning both sides exchanged proposals, but no final agreement was reached, nor were any new tentative compromises reached on the final sticking points.

The Harvard Graduate Students Union-United Automobile Workers set a Tuesday deadline to strike if a deal isn't reached.

The unresolved issues are important for the more than 4,000 graduate students in the union, said Lee Kennedy-Shaffer, a fourth-year doctoral student in biostatistics and a member of the bargaining committee for the student workers union.

“We’ve been negotiating with university for over a year; it’s been plenty of time,” he said. “We’re confident that if the administration wants to make a deal we can get it done.”

Union representatives told Harvard officials they are prepared to discuss any compromises until the rally and walk-out begins at 10:30 a.m. Tuesday, Kennedy-Shaffer said.

“We continue to feel a strike is unwarranted,” said Jonathan Swain, a Harvard spokesman. “A strike will neither clarify our respective positions nor will it resolve areas of disagreement.”

The union is seeking better pay, expanded health care and child care benefits, and an outside arbitrator to handle complaints of sexual harassment, discrimination, and retaliation. Graduate student workers have argued that Harvard has historically been

slow to address allegations of sexual harassment by longtime professors and that graduate students need the protection offered by an independent third party.

But Harvard officials said the Title IX sexual harassment complaint process has improved significantly in recent years.

While other bargaining units on campus have the option to go into arbitration over sexual harassment complaints, none have used that process, instead opting to go through the university's Title IX office, Harvard officials said.

Stipends for Harvard doctoral students vary by school and range from \$35,500 to \$43,000 annually.

Harvard has also proposed an 8 percent pay increase over three years for a majority of the graduate students in the union. But union members said that would end up being less than the 3 percent annual raise many of them have received in recent years.

The union has countered with a proposal for a 5 percent raise the first year of the contract and a 3.5 percent increase in subsequent years, Kennedy-Shaffer said.

Planning by both sides for a potential strike began several weeks ago. Harvard sent faculty notices on how to plan for graduate students leaving their jobs, and the union posted schedules for picket lines.

At Harvard, graduate students help teach classes, grade papers, and work in research labs. Many could choose to walk out of their jobs and join the picket line.

It remains unclear how widespread the disruptions from the strike could be. Most classes this term are coming to an end on campus, but tests and papers still must be graded. The university has more than 4,000 graduate student workers and nearly 2,500 voted to authorize a strike in October, but Harvard officials are uncertain how many will actually stop their work.

Nationwide, graduate student strikes remain rare, but they are becoming more common.

Public university graduate students have been part of unions for decades, and in recent years, their peers at private colleges and universities have tried to follow suit, in some cases striking to get recognition.

Under the Obama administration, the National Labor Relations Board had cleared the way for graduate students to be considered workers and eligible for collective bargaining.

But the board under the Trump administration reversed that ruling in September.

As tenure-track positions have declined, research universities have become increasingly reliant on graduate students to do basic academic work, such as helping to teach classes and grade papers. Many of these graduate students are demanding better pay and benefits for that work, de Leon said.

They are also more willing to stop their work to send a message to universities, said William A. Herbert, the executive director of the National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions at Hunter College.

Most strikes have lasted 10 days or less, but teaching assistants at the University of Illinois Chicago went on a three-week strike earlier this year, forcing the cancellation of hundreds of classes.

Last year, graduate student workers at Columbia University in New York picketed for a week in protest of that institution's refusal to negotiate. Columbia eventually agreed to bargain.

"There seems to be an increase in the number of strikes and their durations," Herbert said.

The last major strike on Harvard's campus involved dining hall workers who walked off the job in 2016 to protest low wages and rising health care costs. That strike lasted for about a month before workers negotiated a new five-year contract with Harvard.

---

Deirdre Fernandes can be reached at [deirdre.fernandes@globe.com](mailto:deirdre.fernandes@globe.com). Follow her on Twitter [@fernandesglobe](https://twitter.com/fernandesglobe).

[Show 36 comments](#)

---

©2019 Boston Globe Media Partners, LLC