

Lessons from the 2016 Harvard Strike

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For 22 days during the month of October 2016, more than 750 cooks, food servers, dishwashers, and cashiers struck Harvard University's dining halls. This was the first open-ended strike in the 380-year history of the institution. It drew national and international press and inspired many students, faculty, and members of the university community to rally in support of the workers.¹ The strike's picket lines, marches, acts of civil disobedience, and building occupation became a collective repudiation of the corporate logic of the contemporary American university, one that privileges endowments, budgets, and HR departments over community, humanitarian values, and families. This was summed up in the slogan chanted thousands of times in Harvard Yard: "If we don't get it, SHUT IT DOWN!"

In the end, Harvard lost, badly. On the last day of the strike, the administration was literally under siege: hundreds of students walked out of class and marched on the building where negotiations were taking place. There, they staged an occupation of the lobby while hundreds of striking workers rallied and picketed outside, demanding the administration capitulate. By 2:00 in the morning, Harvard had no choice but to agree to all of the workers' demands.²

Events like the dining hall strike at Harvard can seem spontaneous or, at the very least, fortuitous. As one of the elected leaders of UNITE HERE Local 26, the union that represents the workers at Harvard, I hope I can provide some insight into how and why the strike was successful. This article explains the origins of the conflict, the formulation of the strikers' demands, and the organization and conduct of the strike. It also sheds light on creative tactics that the strikers and the union deployed to create an inclusive rather than divisive strike, welcoming the participation of the entire campus community. At a time when the American labor movement is weak and embattled, it is worth asking: What are the mechanics of a successful worker-led job action? What lessons can be derived from the dining hall workers' victory?

Large-scale strikes have almost disappeared in the United States.³ The labor movement has suffered from a decades-long assault on labor rights by corporations and the politicians that have supported them. This has led many unions to favor electoral political activity—the effort to get pro-labor, or at least lesser-evil, politicians elected—over worker militancy as their strategy to defend the past century of economic and social gains won by organized labor. In addition to reducing the amount of union funds spent on organizing militant actions, the effect of this decision has been to weaken organized labor's ability to fulfill its members' hopes, dreams, and aspirations.

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Defying this tendency, the Harvard strike began with hundreds of conversations between dining hall workers, students, and Local 26 leaders during the summer of 2015. A committee composed of rank-and-file worker leaders, student representatives, and union staff designed and conducted an in-depth survey about how dining hall employees experienced their jobs at Harvard. This survey facilitated hundreds of discussions, many at workers' homes. It asked workers not just to talk about contractual issues like wages and benefits, but to explain how their economic struggles affected their lives and families outside of work. The process of administering this survey allowed the campaign's leaders to understand how workers experienced the economic loss and dislocation inflicted upon them by the university's corporate decision-making. It also facilitated the building of a campus-wide organization, grounded in the workers' anger, which was capable of mounting a successful campaign. By listening to workers' stories and creating an effective organization, the negotiating committee and union leadership grounded the goals of the contract campaign in the organic experience of the rank and file while developing the militant consensus necessary to win.

These conversations led to two simple demands: First, workers would not pay a penny more for their health insurance; and second, all workers should be guaranteed a minimum annual income of \$35,000.

The boldness of these demands testified to how the university administration had, in many ways, brought the strike upon itself. The workers' grievances resulted from the economic logic of modern labor relations, wherein the best way to deal with rising expenses is always to shift cost onto workers rather than having the institution bear it. If health plans can be restructured to provide disincentives to seek medical care, usually in the form of high deductibles, all the better. The Harvard administration had already succeeded (with some controversy) at making similar changes to the health care plans of faculty members, nonunion managers and professionals, and unionized clerical and technical workers.⁴ From the administration's point of view, it was a *fait accompli* that dining hall workers would accept the same deal, despite the fact that dining hall workers are paid far less than these other categories of employees.

The administration also created the conditions that led to workers demanding a minimum annual guaranteed income of \$35,000. Over the past decade, Harvard had not only lengthened the summer recess, but also created a January term that effectively shuttered dining halls from the middle of December until the end of January. Rather than trying to find work or some other accommodation for employees who lost significant income as a result of these changes, however, the university simply saw layoffs as a financial bonus to changes in the academic calendar, never lifting a finger to resolve the issue for the workers. Gene VanBuren, a cook at the Harvard Law School, neatly summarized the administration's arrogance and hypocrisy on the eve of the strike: "While the academic community teaches about how to fix income

inequality and racism,” he said after negotiations broke down, “the administration can’t figure out how to pay us well or maintain our health benefits.”⁵

This disregard for workers’ concerns continued once the strike began. From the early days of the negotiations, Harvard made it clear that it had no intention of agreeing to freeze workers’ health insurance costs or guaranteeing a \$35,000 annual income. Instead, management approached negotiations as theater. They believed there would be back-and-forth, but that the workers would ultimately surrender. What they did not understand is that thousands of hours of discussion and agitation had gone into building a campus-wide consensus. By the time negotiations began, the workers, acting as a union in the truest sense, already agreed that their demands needed to be met. They would accept nothing less. But the administration, arrogant and isolated, did not believe that the hundreds of workers who pledged to walk out, and who voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike, meant what they said. They failed to see that the leadership of the union, in coordination with the negotiating committee, had successfully challenged the rank and file to fulfill the promise of their bold demands with bold action.

When the strike came, it engulfed the campus in a joyous chaos. Instead of following the traditional model of endless worksite picketing, strikers mobilized to create the maximum disruption of campus activities while always striving to be inclusive of the entire university community. Daily picket lines merged into large marches that paraded through Harvard Yard and spilled into the streets of Cambridge. Strikers targeted key decision-makers on campus; when members of the Harvard Corporation visited campus, picketers surrounded their meeting places, taking their demands directly to the leadership of the university. When celebrities and politicians like Ben Stiller, Elizabeth Warren, Cornel West, Shaun King, and Keegan-Michael Key attended events on campus, strikers reached out to them, inviting them to stand in solidarity by taking a selfie with a strike sign or joining a picket. The strikers held cookouts with students who graciously donated food for picketers, events that allowed the dining hall workers to show off their culinary skills and their role as providers to the campus community. When the Honk Fest, an international convention of radical marching bands held in Cambridge and Somerville, came to town, the strikers marched with the bands, dancing in the streets and inviting bystanders to come along. By keeping the strike fun, unpredictable, and focused on a tone-deaf and out-of-touch Harvard administration, the strikers invited every member of the Harvard and greater Boston community to join them in their fight. The strike’s inclusiveness was even reflected on the picket signs, which, in a cheerful font, invited passers-by to “Support the Strike!”

Inclusivity, rather than division, was key to isolating the administration and building the broad coalition that won the strike. Unions typically try to define the actions and terms that they deem acceptable forms of support for striking workers. This creates the potential for divisiveness when individuals or groups who want to be supportive of a strike find themselves unable to, or uncomfortable with the union’s requirements for supporting strikers. At Harvard,

however, the strikers allowed individuals and groups to decide how to show their support. As a result, the strike took on a multidimensional character, with allies showing their solidarity in stunningly diverse ways. Undergraduate students staged a “dine-out,” bringing food to Harvard Yard and holding a mass picnic in front of the administration building. This was followed by a speak-out where students sang, rapped, and even breakdanced in support of the strikers. Divinity School students held a spontaneous interfaith service for the strikers; Law School students held a teach-in; dozens of Medical School students rallied against Harvard’s proposed health plan, marching in their white coats. Scores of individuals donated food, diapers, and baby formula to strikers; almost one thousand people, including many faculty and alumni, donated to the strike assistance fund.

By allowing everyone to contribute to the strike in their own way, the strikers won near-unanimous support. The *Harvard Crimson* editorialized multiple times in favor not only of the strikers’ demands, but in favor of the strike itself. “HUDS workers should not have to accept drastic cuts to their healthcare, or feel compelled to work overtime in order to earn a living wage,” the editorial board wrote. “Therefore, we will support HUDS workers in a strike if Harvard does not make reasonable concessions.”⁶ The breadth and diversity of support for the strike was amplified by social media postings by strikers, faculty, students, and alumni. As the strike dragged on, the administration’s isolation grew, and national and international news outlets began to question why a settlement had not been reached. The *Washington Post* and the *Guardian* ran long articles on the conflict, with the *Guardian* pointing out that “Harvard has an endowment of \$37.6bn, the largest in the US... Most of the striking employees work eight months of the year because of student recesses, making an average hourly wage of \$21.89, or \$33,839 a year, according to the university. The irony of the situation is not lost.”⁷ While Harvard’s media relations department struggled to defend its position in the press, *The New York Times* published an op-ed by striker Rosa Ines Rivera.⁸ Rivera’s wrenching account of how she fell behind on rent and lost her home, despite working for the wealthiest educational institution in the world, shamed the university and further strengthened the workers’ moral authority.

This is how an audacious strike, with bold demands run in an inclusive, diverse way, defeated a multibillion-dollar institution.

Much has been written about Donald Trump’s success in wooing working-class, particularly white, voters during his victorious campaign for the presidency in 2016.⁹ Many have argued that his populist, nationalist promise to “Make America Great Again” by returning good manufacturing jobs to the United States won the hearts, if not the minds, of voters disenfranchised by the global neoliberal consensus. These voters, facing bleak economic prospects, rallied around Trump’s weaponization of anti-intellectualism, xenophobia, misogyny, and racism. The answer to declining earnings and a broken health care system lay, Trump argued, in restoring working-class prosperity by returning America to the past, to a whiter, culturally homogeneous time when a good day’s work

meant a good day's pay. To do this, there needed to be a firm hand at the helm, a good king, willing to act rather than talk. Trump styled himself as that man.

Told this way, Trump's success is, in many ways, the failure of the labor movement.¹⁰ By failing to address the social and economic dislocation caused by neoliberalism's pursuit of a globalized economic system that privileges technological innovation, finance capital, and wealth generation at almost any human cost, the labor movement failed the American working class. While there may be some truth in this, I believe the Harvard strike, along with other successful campaigns to mobilize service sector workers, tells a different story, pointing the way to other possibilities in the future. The victory at Harvard shows that a diverse and militant workforce can force multibillion-dollar institutions to transform low-wage jobs into family-sustaining, middle-class jobs. Although the Ivy League university setting provided some unique advantages—in particular, access to the student body and heightened interest by elite press outlets—the strike nevertheless showed how well-organized workers, without resorting to the racist politics of xenophobia and exclusion, can win.

The victory at Harvard proved that strikes still work. It showed that if unions listen to their members, put in the organizing hours, make bold demands, and devote resources to building deep rank-and-file worker organization, the labor movement can still exercise real power. Finally, the strike, with its inclusive spirit and creative expressions of solidarity, helped develop a new language of protest. I hope this spirit will animate the coming battles of the Trump presidency.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Danielle Doug, "Harvard University dining hall workers strike over wages and health-care costs," *The Washington Post*, October 5, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2016/10/05/harvard-university-dining-hall-workers-strike-over-wages-and-health-care-costs/> (accessed December 7, 2016); Katie Rogers, "No End in Sight to Strike by Harvard's Cafeteria Workers Over Wages," *New York Times*, October 11, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/12/us/harvards-cafeteria-workers-strike.html> (accessed December 7, 2016); and Michelle Chen, "The First Campus Strike in Over 30 Years Is Happening at Harvard," *The Nation*, October 11, 2016, <https://www.thenation.com/article/the-first-campus-strike-in-over-thirty-years-is-happening-at-harvard/> (accessed December 7, 2016).

2. See Adam Vaccaro, "In 583-1 vote, Harvard dining hall workers OK labor contract," *The Boston Globe*, October 26, 2016, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/business/2016/10/26/striking-harvard-workers-got-everything-they-wanted-says-union/OtLJHhWcdXeIHbKi1WPIN/story.html> and Emily Deruy (accessed December 7, 2016); Emily DeRuy, "The End of a Labor Strike at the World's Wealthiest University," *The Atlantic*, October 25, 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/10/harvard-and-dining-workers-reach-tentative-agreement-to-end-strike/505349/> (accessed December 7, 2016).

3. See Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Work Stoppages Summary," last modified February 10, 2016, <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/wkstp.nr0.htm> (accessed December 10, 2016).

4. Dev A. Patel and Steven R. Watros, "Faculty Unanimously Passes Motion Asking Corp. to Reverse Health Benefits Changes," *The Harvard Crimson*, November 5, 2014, <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2014/11/5/faculty-benefits-motion-passes/>. (accessed December 7, 2016).

5. UNITE HERE Local 26 press release, "Harvard dining hall workers will strike next Wednesday," September 28, 2016.

6. The Crimson Editorial Board, "Support HUDS Workers," *The Harvard Crimson*, September 13, 2016, <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2016/9/13/support-HUDS-strike/> (accessed December 7, 2016).

7. Danielle Douglas-Gabriel, "Hundreds of Harvard students stage a walkout, occupy building to support dining hall workers," *The Washington Post*, October 24, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2016/10/24/hundreds-of-harvard-students-stage-a-walkout-occupy-building-to-support-striking-dining-hall-workers/> (accessed December 7, 2016); Sarah Betancourt, "Striking dining hall workers arrested amid protest over pay," *The Guardian*, October 16, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/oct/16/harvard-university-strike-dining-hall-workers-protest> (accessed December 7, 2016).

8. Rosa Ines Rivera, "Struggling to Serve at the Nation's Richest University," *New York Times*, October 24, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/12/us/harvards-cafeteria-workers-strike.html> (accessed December 7, 2016).

9. See, for example, Nate Cohn, "Why Trump Won: Working-Class Whites," *The New York Times*, November 9, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/10/upshot/why-trump-won-working-class-whites.html> (accessed December 7, 2016) and Jim Tankersley, "How Trump won: The revenge of working-class voters," *The Washington Post*, November 9, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/11/09/how-trump-won-the-revenge-of-working-class-whites/> (accessed December 7, 2016).

10. See Michael Kazin, "The Fall of the Unions Paved the Way for Donald Trump," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 11, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/the-fall-of-the-unions-paved-the-way-for-donald-trump-1478886094> (accessed December 7, 2016).