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Our case to fight for power

Dear HGSU-UAW members,

We are writing to urge you to vote 'No' on the current tentative agreement. We write this letter with great respect for our colleagues on the current bargaining committee; we know how hard it is to negotiate an agreement with this administration. But it is in light of that experience that we are convinced that a better contract is still winnable.

This TA has secured several important gains, including significant raises this year and next year, a fund (although inadequate) to provide student workers with outside legal services in the Title IX process, and pay parity for the School of Public Health. However, it has major deficiencies that will undermine our collective ability to advocate for a more just and equitable Harvard for years to come.

Most notably, this TA includes an “open shop,” a provision that prevents our union from being financially sustainable and from carrying out our mission to protect and advance the needs of student workers. All student workers benefit from the raises, benefits, and workplace protections that we win in our union contract -- whether or not they formally join the union as a member. In fact, our union is **legally obligated** to represent members and non-members on an equal basis. Securing these benefits and representing all workers (at the richest university in the world) takes financial resources: money to pay for staff, maintain our strike fund, and bring grievances to arbitration in order to enforce our rights. For this reason, every other union contract on Harvard's campus -- and nearly every private-sector union contract in Massachusetts -- includes a provision for an “agency shop,” in which all workers share the cost of union representation. In contrast, the “open shop” provision in this TA -- which Harvard's administration prefers because they want a weak union -- would allow individuals to free ride and refuse to pay any dues or fees, while still getting all of the benefits of the contract. Over time, this free-riding would starve our union of the resources we need to enforce the current contract or to win a strong subsequent agreement with real recourse.

A union shop would provide our union with over a million dollars annually to represent the interests of over 4,500 student workers and contribute to sustainable organizing on campus. In comparison, the Harvard administration has offered \$65,000 annually to cover costs of administering benefits. By starving our union of these funds, which we as members democratically decide how to spend, the administration is once again engaging in union-busting.

Furthermore, accepting a contract with an “open shop” sets a threatening precedent for all workers on campus and in Massachusetts generally. There is a reason why the corporate campaign for the open shop -- under the misleading label of “right to work” -- has been a staple of the anti-labor agenda for nearly a century, from the Jim Crow South to today's

corporate campaign and its billionaire backers. It is an affront to the basic principles of solidarity that animate the union movement.

Over one year ago, in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the first bargaining committee made the difficult decision to accept a short-term contract -- and members made the difficult decision to ratify that contract. We knew this contract lacked protections our members need and deserve. However, in the face of economic precarity at the start of the pandemic, and given the uncertainty surrounding our ability to strike during the first semester of remote work, we felt that spending a single year with a weak contract was better for our members than a year without any contract.

However, this current TA is four years long, which means that it will be four long years before student workers are able to fix the problems in this contract -- such as the open shop provision and the contract's failure to provide real recourse (i.e. any independent adjudication mechanism) for survivors of sexual harassment or discrimination on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, or gender identity. By the time we are able to negotiate a new contract -- in 2025 -- , a significant portion of current student workers will have graduated, and these deficiencies will become calcified into standard practice.

Now is not the time for us to accept a contract that will undermine student workers' rights and weaken our union. Harvard has returned to in-person teaching and research work, so we can hold effective and disruptive strikes. Furthermore, for the first time since our union was certified in 2018, we are organizing in the context of a federal government that is committed to protecting student workers' rights. We do not know how much longer this favorable legal environment will last. Rather than backing down, we should use every mechanism at our disposal to secure a strong contract. Instead of giving up on a strong union now, student workers can make a resounding statement, vote no on this TA, and strike for a strong contract in the spring.

In solidarity,

LINK IS NOW CLOSED.

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