

Boston University resident assistants strike, joining grad students striking since March

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11 September 2024

Resident assistants at Boston University went on strike August 31 over an impasse in negotiations with BU for better pay and working conditions. RAs supervise dormitories, provide guidance and act as a resource to students in university housing. This challenging work is done on top of RAs carrying out their own academic responsibilities.

Nearly 300 BU RAs joined Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 509 in 2023 in hopes of securing better working conditions and pay. They are asking for a fair stipend for every semester they work on par with payments received by student RAs at other area colleges. Currently, BU RAs receive little remuneration beyond a credit covering housing costs and in some cases meal plans. Most US colleges provide housing and meal plan credits to RAs in addition to stipends and hourly wages. Some RAs at BU receive a paltry \$9-\$14 a week stipend, depending on the number of students in their dorm.

The RA strike cannot be separated from the ongoing struggle of the graduate workers at the university. Three thousand BU graduate students, organized in the same SEIU local, went on strike in March for improved pay and benefits and still have not reached an agreement with the university, basically having been abandoned by the SEIU apparatus.

Graduate workers teach classes, lead discussion sessions and grade student work, among other roles at the university. They perform this work—at a fraction of the cost of paying a professor—while working toward a higher degree or conducting research.

Currently, BU graduate workers are paid between \$27,318 for eight months to \$40,977 for 12 months of work, less than the \$46,918 median cost of living in Boston, where the average one-bedroom apartment rents for over \$3,000 a month. Since the 1980s there has been a major shift in academia away from full-time workers to part-time and student work, in an effort by colleges to reduce teaching costs.

The SEIU union leadership has kept the demands of graduate workers low and failed to challenge BU with a full

show of strength. Only a small fraction of graduate workers remain on strike, around 500 of them as of May, with many continuing to fulfill their roles at the university. The minority of striking grad students are having their pay withheld by the university and the union is only providing strike pay of \$40 per day. Workers must provide documentation to the union that they have performed strike-related work for four hours each day for which they are claiming strike pay, topping out at a maximum of \$200 a week.

So far, the university has been unmoved by the union's largely ineffective strike, as of August offering only an increase to \$45,000 for a 12-month stipend and an increase from \$15 to \$20 an hour minimum pay for hourly workers. The contract offer includes only a 3 percent increase a year over its proposed five-year period, an "increase" that would be quickly eaten up by inflation.

SEIU Local 509 has 20,000 members in Massachusetts working in education and human services. The international union has about 2 million members across the US, with enormous funds available given a nearly \$300 million annual revenue from dues. If the SEIU were serious about winning substantial pay increases and benefits for graduate workers and RAs, it would unite their struggles and organize solidarity strikes at other workplaces.

As for the striking resident assistants, BU announced September 5 that it would charge striking RAs housing and food costs for every day they are on strike. Jason Campbell-Foster, dean of students stated contemptuously that these charges would constitute an "educational experience for students. They are not accustomed to formalized labor relations, and this is one of the impacts of choosing not to work."

BU has offered only a \$1,000 stipend per semester over the course of negotiations, substantially less than what is paid to RAs at other private schools in the Boston Area. RAs at Tufts University receive \$1,425 a semester, while Emerson College RAs receive up to \$1,600 a semester. Even these payments are only a drop in the bucket considering the

skyrocketing costs of tuition and living in the Boston area.

RAs play an important role in the everyday life of students. In addition to supervising dormitories, they are often involved in assisting students with mental health issues and other difficulties of student life.

As a person whose sibling was recently an RA commented on the R/Boston subreddit, “There were countless mental health crises they responded to, helicopter parents who would call and harass the staff when they couldn’t get in touch with their adult children, the horrible living conditions students created for themselves. It is more than 20 hours a week dealing with young adults growing up and learning to live on their own.”

RAs perform these services on top of their own schoolwork, and they must maintain a 2.7 grade point average or risk losing their housing. While BU claims students are saving \$10,000 to \$20,000 by being given free housing—a component of the \$90,000 it costs to attend the university—without the work of RAs the university would need to pay outside workers hundreds of thousands of dollars more each year in cash.

The average yearly cost of attending BU has soared by over 40 percent since 2014-2015, rising from \$63,644 to \$90,000. This leaves many students saddled with massive student debt upon graduation.

According to Campbell-Foster, the SEIU initially asked for \$4,500 a semester and meal plans for all RAs regardless of the type of housing they supervise. He claims the union has already retreated to \$2,300 a semester as a proposed stipend. Only around 75 of the approximately 300 RAs in the union are on strike, an indication that many of them fear that the SEIU will leave the RAs to the same fate as the grad student strikers.

The SEIU consistently works to isolate and betray workers struggles and subordinate members to the pro-war, pro-austerity politics of the Democratic Party. Democratic members of Congress, including Massachusetts Senators Elizabeth Warren and Ed Markey, have made perfunctory appearances at the graduate workers’ picket line, but have done nothing to actively assist graduate workers to win better pay and benefits.

The Biden-Harris administration has worked with labor union bureaucracies to shut down strikes across the country, passing a bill in 2022 blocking a strike by railroad workers. According to Opensecrets.org, the SEIU has spent nearly \$15 million in political contributions during the 2024 election cycle, overwhelmingly to Democratic candidates.

SEIU Secretary-Treasurer April Verrett spoke at the Democratic National Convention last month to endorse Kamala Harris’ presidential campaign. Verrett pulled in a salary of \$284,431 in 2023, with all executive officers at

SEIU earning over \$225,000, according to Americans for Fair Treatment, placing them within the top 3 percent of the population.

Striking resident assistants and graduate workers must place their struggle within a larger context. Access to a quality education is a social right, but under capitalism it is big business, in which heavily endowed institutions burden young people with deep, long-term debt and pay poverty wages to academic and other workers.

The first step toward a winning strategy for striking RAs and grad students is to form a campus-wide rank-and-file committee of BU workers, independent of the union apparatuses and the Democratic Party, as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). Such a committee would open the lines of communication across BU and to universities across Massachusetts and beyond, formulate demands that meet the needs of campus workers and organize joint actions. Go here for more information on building a rank-and-file committee at BU.

Students and campus workers face a common struggle. BU students looking to support the striking workers, and to fight against social inequality, war and the turn to dictatorship by the ruling class, should form a chapter of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) on campus. The genocide in Gaza, and the intensifying war drive by US imperialism against Russia, Iran and China, must be answered by workers and youth with a fight for socialism. The violent response of university administrations to student protests against the war on the Palestinians, and the slander of students and faculty protesters as “antisemites,” must not go unanswered.



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