Workers and Wages

At a time of national concern about stagnating incomes, rising inequality, and middle-class malaise, the University confronted contentious issues with its lowest-paid workers throughout the autumn, yielding the first strike in more than three decades; a last-minute agreement with another union; and an unprecedented organizing election among graduate students and other teaching and research assistants.

For several years, Harvard has sought to control rising costs for employee health benefits. It subjected nonunionized faculty and staff members to deductibles and coinsurance beginning in 2015, and made similar changes a focus of bargaining with its unions thereafter. The settlement between the University and its largest union, the Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers (HUCTW), last January, seemed to set something of a pattern: somewhat slimmer salary increases than in prior contracts; higher copayments for medical care—but no deductibles or coinsurance; and, under Harvard’s progressive insurance structure, a new tier for workers whose incomes are less than $55,000, who will now pay 13 percent of premiums (in the previous low tier, under $70,000, workers paid 15 percent). HUCTW also gave Harvard some concessions on retiree health coverage. (Details are available at harvardmag.com/huctwcontract-16.)

But both Harvard University Dining Services (HUDS) workers, represented by UNITED HERE Local 26, and custodians, represented by 32BJ SEIU (the Service Employees International Union), present a different employee profile. They are, in general, paid less than most HUCTW members, and even though their hourly wages and employee benefits are superior to those of many workers in com-
workers paraded around campus, chanting proposals, and after four months of negotiations, the workers went on strike Octo-
ber 5—the first strike at Harvard since 1983.

During the next three weeks, striking workers paraded around campus, chanting and beating out rhythms on five-gallon buckets. They appeared to attract significant support from students, many of whom are friendly with the staff they see daily at meals. Most dining halls closed, but HUDS managers (and nonunion employees who were asked by their supervisors to pitch in) maintained operations at some facilities.

Following a 22-day strike, negotiators reached agreement after a marathon bargaining session (accompanied by a large student sit-in at the building where the talks were conducted), and the workers voted 583–1 to approve a contract. It provides a $35,000 guaranteed income for those who work full time during the academic year, achieved by paying a stipend of $2,400 across 13 weeks, or about $185 per week (rising to $3,000, or about $231 per week, by 2020), with a pro-rated stipend for part-time workers. Wages will increase 2.5 percent annually for the five-year term of the agreement. And health coverage will remain unchanged for the next two years, and then will move toward higher copayments, but with part of workers’ added costs covered by a flexible spending account for each worker. Read a full report at harvardmag.com/hsdinhscontract-16.

With those negotiations resolved, attention turned to the November 16-17 balloting, overseen by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), for possible union recognition for graduate-student teaching and research assistants (as well as undergraduates who perform paid teaching duties in classes like Computer Science 50). Harvard graduate students have been organizing for more than a year to form a labor union. They won the legal right to do so last summer, after the NLRB—unswayed by an amicus brief filed by the University urging a decision against student unionization—ruled that graduate students at private universities have the right to form labor unions (as reported at harvardmag.com/hsbjseiucontract-16).

Gender Agenda

Even as the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS) intensely debated the College’s proposed rules sanctioning student participation in single-gender final clubs and similar social organizations, which are not officially recognized by Harvard, an outcry arose over overtly sexist behavior by two men’s sports teams—decidedly official Harvard groups, with the substantial institutional budget and staff support that match athletics’ status and assumed role in undergraduate life. Herewith, a summary of the parallel developments during the fall semester.

In May 2016, dean of Harvard College Rakesh Khurana recommended, and President Drew Faust endorsed, that beginning in...