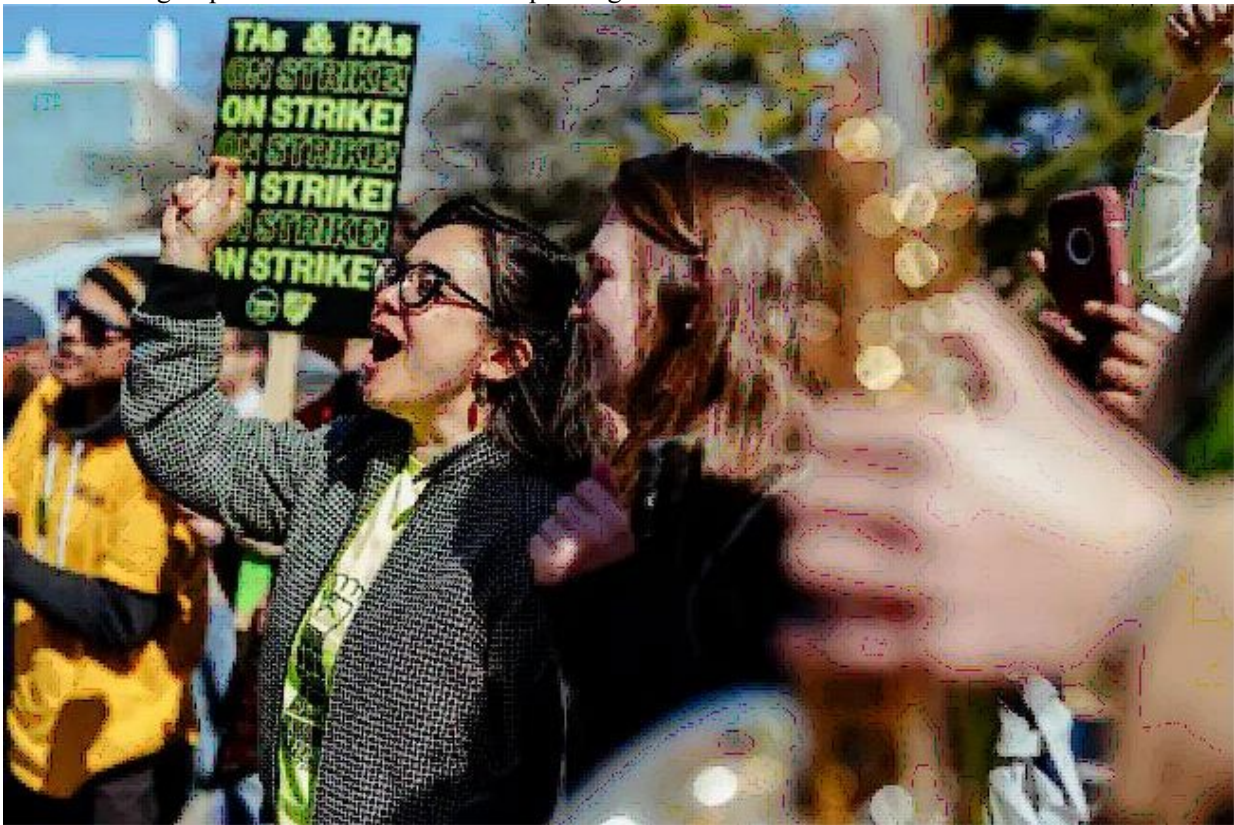


NEWS

More student workers are forming unions — and striking — at universities in Philly and beyond

Resident hall assistants at the University of Pennsylvania are attempting to form a union, which would be the first such group to unionize in the Philadelphia region.



Temple graduate student teaching and research assistants went on strike for 42 days and ratified a new agreement earlier this month. Colleen Stepanian

by [Susan Snyder](#) and [Lizzy McLellan Ravitch](#)

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At the University of Pennsylvania, students who work as residence hall assistants have filed with the National Labor Relations Board to hold an election that, if successful, would allow them to form a union.

It would be the first group of RAs to unionize in the Philadelphia region, though elsewhere — including at Barnard, [Mount Holyoke](#), [Wesleyan](#), Columbia, and Tufts — students have moved to do the same.

“We need compensation that reflects the importance of our work, and we need an influential, democratic voice, and only a union can give us that,” said Mica Lin-Alves, 23, a junior urban studies major from Amherst, Mass.

“We see this as a movement that is sweeping the nation.”



Students and supporters gather around the bell tower for a TUGSA rally on Temple's campus, on Tuesday, Feb. 28. Tyger Williams / Staff Photographer

Indeed, nationally, more undergraduate and graduate student workers at both public and private colleges are forming unions, fueled by a resurgence of appreciation for what it means to have representation in the workplace, said William A. Herbert, executive director of the National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions at Hunter College, which is part of the City University of New York.

“There’s essentially a new generation of people who are now recognizing that they are better placed for improving their working conditions through having union representation,” he said.

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The pandemic, he said, also showed the value of having a union to advocate for health and safety issues on campus.

And a 2016 NLRB ruling [paved the way](#) for student workers at private colleges to unionize. (Those at many public colleges already had that right under state laws.) Workers were still reticent to unionize when Donald Trump was president, said Scott Williams of OPEIU Local 153, the union with which Penn RAs are organizing, but now there’s an explosion of interest with President Joe Biden and a more union-friendly NLRB.

» **[READ MORE: Rutgers' unions representing faculty, grad students, and adjuncts pass strike-authorization vote](#)**

It’s also not a coincidence that the push for better pay and benefits comes as colleges are facing perhaps one of their greatest financial challenges, given inflation, as well as lasting effects of the pandemic and lower enrollments. Schools are hard-pressed to raise tuition at the rate of inflation, so in some cases are passing some of that burden onto their workers, who are fighting back.

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At the same time, there's questioning — and now pushback — against the longtime hierarchies of higher education, said Nathan Grawe, a professor of economics at Carleton College.

"They're wondering about the justice of a system in which the graduate students are paid so much less than faculty peers and yet the education they provide is foundational for students who are paying the same tuition regardless who is teaching them," Grawe said.

"It really is a confluence of some challenges that by themselves would be very difficult. Together, they put considerable pressure on institutions."

» **READ MORE:** [Temple grad students overwhelmingly ratify agreement, ending their six-week strike](#)

'They've always been at the mercy of the universities'

Workers at educational institutions, including colleges and K-12 schools, accounted for the majority of those out on strike last year, [according to a report](#) by the Worker Institute at Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations.

Much of that was fueled by the graduate student strike at the University of California, Eli Friedman, an author of the report, [told the Chronicle of Higher Education](#). It was the largest-ever among academic workers, according to their union, UAW Local 2865, with the resulting contract covering 36,000 graduate students.

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Rafael Jaime, 2865 president at the University of California, said he's heard from other unions wanting to learn more about the contract it won, which brought minimum pay to \$36,000 for teaching assistants and \$40,000 for graduate student researchers by the end of 2024. Previously, some had been making as little as \$24,000.

Low pay is a common thread among student workers who are organizing, said Jaime, a doctoral candidate at UCLA. Another unifier is lack of control over the work environment.

"For a long time, they haven't had a lot of protections. They've always been at the mercy of the universities," Jaime said.

The Temple effect

In 2023, new graduate student bargaining units have been certified at Yale, USC, the University of Chicago, Johns Hopkins, and Northwestern, representing an additional 12,000 graduate assistants, said Herbert, of the Hunter College center.

Others, like the Temple University Graduate Student Association, at about 25 years old, have been around a lot longer. TUGSA [garnered national attention](#) during its 42-day strike, which ended earlier this month with a ratified agreement. Undergraduates at Temple [are now trying to organize](#), too.

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TUGSA's fight — which included turning down an initial tentative agreement and successfully fighting for a better deal — has not gone unnoticed by union workers at other local colleges, especially when graduate workers persisted even after Temple withdrew tuition remission and health-care insurance subsidies for striking workers.

"It looked very inspiring to me," said Liana Katz, vice president for graduate workers with the AAUP-AFT union at Rutgers University. "To see the grad workers hold out ... sets a really good precedent for us if we need to go on strike."



Rutgers-Camden faculty, professors, graduates, and student volunteers held a "Work In" at the Campus Center in Camden, N.J., on Tuesday, Feb. 28. Faculty, graduate students and adjuncts there authorized their negotiating committees to call a strike if necessary. [Read more](#) Tyger Williams / Staff Photographer

At Rutgers, graduate teaching and research assistants on a nine-month appointment earn a little over \$30,000 and are seeking to boost pay to \$37,000 in the first year of a new contract and to \$41,000 by the end of it, said Katz, 34, a fourth-year doctoral candidate in geography on the New Brunswick campus.

[A strike there is](#) a distinct possibility.

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Rutgers' full-time faculty, graduate students, and adjuncts — and more recently its union that represents 1,300 physicians, researchers, and other health science faculty — have authorized their negotiating committees to call strikes if necessary. Their contracts expired last summer.

People are tired of universities relying on "heavily exploited and underpaid labor" whether graduate students or adjuncts, said Rebecca Givan, president of Rutgers AAUP-AFT. Full-time faculty were galvanized, too, during the pandemic, she said.

"For instructors who moved their classes online without any additional compensation, worked tirelessly to support students during the pandemic and feel they got nothing in return, it has really increased their militancy and willingness to take action," she said.

While TUGSA was striking, more than 1,400 residents and fellows at the University of Pennsylvania Health System also [filed a petition to unionize](#).

Madison Sharp, a third-year ob/gyn resident who is helping to organize the residents and fellows, said she saw the situation at Temple as "both inspiring ... and also incredibly frustrating," speaking with The Inquirer about two weeks into TUGSA's strike. "There's definitely similarities even though we're in different fields and industries," she said.

Student workers at Pennsylvania State University have been watching TUGSA and other unions make demands for better pay and workplace conditions, said Bailey Campbell, a Ph.D. student and graduate research assistant there.

"It's impossible to not be inspired by them," Campbell said. "When we see other fellow workers achieve things through solidarity, through collective bargaining, collective action, it's empowering."

A [vote was held in 2018](#) to unionize Penn State's graduate student workers but ended with 950 students voting for unionization and 1,438 against. It's possible to hold another unionizing election after a one-year cooling period, and that's something [a coalition of student workers is exploring](#).

'A balanced path forward'

At Penn, the university has challenged the RAs' petition, saying the assistants are not employees and do not get paid, but rather have an "educational relationship" with the university. RAs, who get their room and some meals covered by Penn, live on floors with other students and are in charge of building community and hosting events and programs; they are seen as leaders whom other students can turn to for help.

"The University of Pennsylvania greatly appreciates and values our Resident Advisors and Graduate Resident Advisors, who are important student leaders on campus," the university said in the statement. "Unionization is a very significant issue, and we encourage all RAs and GRAs to be as informed as possible."

In the meantime, RAs are awaiting the scheduling of a vote. Getting a vote typically takes a little over a month, but because Penn has decided to challenge the petition, it will take longer.

While students haven't figured out exactly what they would bargain for, asking for a stipend is under consideration, said Lin-Alves, who put the number of RAs at about 220, evenly among undergraduate and graduate students.

During the pandemic, RAs were asked to put in long hours and risk their own health before COVID-19 vaccines were available, Lin-Alves said. RAs are required to stay on campus through weekends and holidays, attend weekly staff meetings, meet one-on-one with students, respond to emergencies, organize hall events, and work overnight shifts.

They receive housing worth about \$11,000 and a small dining plan equivalent to a little more than three buffet meals a week, worth \$2,000 to \$3,000, Lin-Alves said.

Students with high financial need already are getting room and board and meals covered, so in many cases, they essentially are working for free, he said.

"This in my opinion discourages RAs from low-income backgrounds from seeking these positions," he said.

While the relationship between student workers and their universities is a unique employee-employer arrangement, that hasn't kept other unions from showing solidarity. The TUGSA strike, for example, drew labor leaders from a variety of sectors to the picket line.

Striking creates an opportunity for those student workers, and others thinking of organizing, to see that support across industries, employers, and occupations, said Danny Bauder, president of the AFL-CIO Philadelphia Council, of which TUGSA is an affiliate.

"I hope it shows [the student workers] that the labor community is here for them when they want to organize," Bauder said.

But Grawe, the economics professor, said what's really needed is "a balanced path forward."

"If we push our employers to do more than they can, it weakens them, and that's not in our best interest," he said. "And employers have to realize they are only as strong as the employees who work for them."

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I cover issues and trends affecting colleges. If it happens on campus, I'm interested.



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