

What's behind the grad student strike at Boston University?

My students are being financially exploited—based on a social imaginary that doesn't reflect the realities of higher ed.

by [Nicolette Manglos-Weber](#) in the [July 2024](#) issue

Published on May 16, 2024



Graduate workers at Boston University on strike for better protections and pay in April. (Photo by Pacamah / Wikimedia Commons)

For the past several weeks, hundreds of graduate student workers at Boston University, where I am on the faculty, have been on strike. The strike follows several

years of union organizing—and a much longer history of frustration with the failure of grad worker pay and benefits to keep up with the cost of living.

Given that I work for a theology school and seminary attached to a private university, one might assume that my biggest existential concerns have to do with ideological polarization or church decline. But those are not the things that keep me up at night. Rather, my daily work of teaching, writing, and administration is shaped by worry for the bodily wellbeing of students. They face both the grind of academic pressure and the weight of material poverty. While current discourse focuses on ideological conflict on university campuses, students face more mundane threats as well: threats of creeping exploitation.

Boston University students are far from alone in this situation. Grad workers have been unionizing across the country. Contributing factors include a national housing crisis, runaway medical and educational debt, and increasing wealth inequality. Grad workers in particular are reacting as well to stagnating pay even as administrative budgets and high-profile centers and programs expand. They are also responding to a 2016 National Labor Relations Board decision that recognized the organizing and collective bargaining rights of grad workers at private universities.

In Boston the economic challenges to student workers are acute. It is difficult to find a rental in the city for less than \$2,000, and university-subsidized housing is minimal. Many of my student advisees are “severely rent burdened,” according to the US Department of Housing and Urban Development’s definition: they spend more than half their income on rent. Many early-stage faculty are moderately rent burdened as well, meaning that more than 30 percent of their earnings go to housing.

Grad worker jobs have never been high paying, of course. They are also different from other forms of wage labor in certain ways. Universities conceive of grad school as an apprenticeship period, a time for young people to forgo immediate financial security as an investment in a fulfilling and comfortable career. This creates a social imaginary—a broadly shared cultural pattern as to how a particular thing is perceived—around grad students and their labor. Within that social imaginary, graduate student workers are understood to be young, moldable, idealistic, energetic (maybe even a bit reckless), and recently launched into the world.

There are two major problems with this. The first is that it simply isn't true. Nearly all the grad students I work with at the School of Theology are international students or students of color, and most are my direct peers age-wise. This is the inevitable result of the church shifting southward, with a greater share of Christian adherents and aspiring leaders coming from the Southern Hemisphere. More broadly, this trend also reflects US universities' growing realization that they cannot sustain their programs without expanding their student base into new, historically minoritized demographics.

In any case, what it means is that the typical grad student is an adult professional, not an emerging adult in a transitional phase of development. It also means that this typical student does not have the safety net of financially supportive parents or inherited family wealth to rely on in a pinch. Many students are providers, not dependents, in their networks of support.

The second problem is closely related to the first: universities use this social imaginary to exploit grad students in body and mind. In their graduate recruitment strategies, universities convey admittance as an invitation into a highly selective community. They emphasize the possibilities for long-term academic employment, and they minimize the reality that few students actually obtain such employment after graduation. They offer a compensation package in line with working full-time at minimum wage (or less)—while also laying out a more enticing, multifaceted experience of taking classes, teaching classes, developing personal research projects, connecting with established experts, and building a cohort of like-minded visionaries.

After entering their programs, students soon learn that this experience demands far more than 40 hours of their time each week. Meanwhile, the boundaries between labor and professional development are blurry. What is mandatory, and what is optional? What is for the student's benefit, and what is for the administration's? Then, when students raise concerns or ask for greater compensation and benefits, administrators resist this by appealing to the social imaginary described above.

I have heard this at my university during the current strike. The provost's office claims that regular cost-of-living generators and metrics (such as being rent burdened) don't apply to grad students. Many faculty and administrators are convinced that the union represents a small number of activist-minded detractors, who are inept and immovable at the bargaining table. Most troublingly,

administrators have operated against the collective will of faculty and staff, pressuring us to act in ways that undermine our student workers and future colleagues—and threatening disciplinary action if we do not.

The core of exploitation is to take more from another than is fair, more than is given in return, to the point of diminishing their dignity. Universities dangle social and even spiritual enticements in the faces of aspirants as a rationale for giving them materially less; then they double down in opposition to those who say it's not enough. The issue here is not just ideologies in conflict. It's that the material interests of two groups are at odds, and one of the two has much more power than the other.

Universities house a lot of the theological training that takes place in the United States, and the exploitation that exists there ripples out to the church and society. It is in all of our best interest—students, faculty, alumni, donors, parents and other relatives—to recognize the mundanely exploitative systems that threaten students and to see those systems change.