

# [***Dartmouth basketball's union vote is just a small part of the campus organizing wave***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BHS-BSY1-DY7V-G00W-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

New York (CNN) &#8212; If you want to find the most new union members, don't go to a [*Starbucks*](https://www.cnn.com/2022/11/02/business/starbucks-union-organizers-risk-takers-22-ctrp/index.html) or an [*Amazon warehouse*](https://www.cnn.com/2022/04/01/tech/amazon-union-election-staten-island/index.html), despite the high profile organizing wins unions have achieved with those employers in recent years. Head to college and university campuses.

The Dartmouth College men's basketball team achieved a significant milestone last week when they became the first college athletes to vote to join a union. But they are only a small part of a much larger trend - that ofcollege and graduate students voting in big numbers to join unions in their on-campus jobs.

Organizing vote wins in higher education have added more new union members than in any other sector of the economy in recent years, said Christian Sweeney, deputy organizing director at the AFL-CIO.

"It's been happening for a while," he said. "It's young people saying we've got to protect our interests here. It's really very much grassroots driven."

The National Labor Relations Board, which oversees union representation votes for private sector employers such as Dartmouth, reports 38 separate elections in just the last two years, including the Dartmouth basketball vote, bringing 41,500 student employees into various unions. And that doesn't include additional students at state schools who are joining unions, but operate under a different labor law.

For example, student assistants at the California State University system voted overwhelmingly to join a union last month, bringing 20,000 into the CSU Employees Union. National totals for those state school union gains are not available, however.

And similar to the 13-2 margin vote in favor of the union at the Dartmouth basketball team last week, the unions are winning these votes overwhelmingly. Overall 90% of the students voting in the NLRB representation elections voted in favor of the unions.

Other union wins at Dartmouth

The Dartmouth basketball vote might never have happened if not for another recent union win at the school, an organizing win by the Student Workers Collective at Dartmouth, which organized 173 students working in food service jobs on campus by winning a vote 52-0 in April of 2022.

It won its first union contract, including big pay raises, about a year later after the newly-formed union voted to authorize a strike. Starting pay, which had been $13 an hour, jumped to $21. More-veteran workers are making between $26 or $28.

"Our entire unit was ready to strike. We let them know it would happen," said Nadine Formiga a Dartmouth junior and a leader of the union. "In 24 hours [Dartmouth administration] scheduled a meeting with us and accepted all our demands."

She said while getting more money was helping students, some workers used the higher pay to work fewer hours.

"Especially at Dartmouth every hour here is precious," she said.

One of those workers impressed by the pay raise was Cade Haskins, a junior majoring in ***politics***, philosophy and economics who, in addition to his job at a campus snack bar, is a forward on the basketball team.

He started talking to his teammates about how the basketball players, who do not receive a scholarship, should form a union as well. He eventually became one of the leaders of the effort.

The other leader of the union effort has been team captain Romeo Myrthil, who came to Dartmouth from Sweden. He was surprised to find how few Americans belong to unions compared to his homeland, one of the most heavily unionized countries in the world.

"There are many things about America that are tough to adjust to," he said.

Organizing athletes still uphill battle

The vote last week by the Dartmouth basketball team rightly got a lot of attention as the first group of college athletes to vote to join a union. But the union efforts for the team aren't yet over. Dartmouth basketball players don't get a scholarship, and the college has announced it will seek to overturn the union vote, arguing that they are not employees.

"We have productive relationships with so many unions. We believe our athletes are students," Dartmouth President Sian Beilock told CNN's Poppy Harlow in an [*interview last month*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/06/business/dartmouth-basketball-union-vote/index.html). "We don't give athletic scholarships. We are student-athletes here, and we believe our students should be thought of in that way."

But the NLRB regional director ruled that because Dartmouth "has the right to control the work performed by the Dartmouth men's basketball team, and the players perform that work in exchange for compensation," they could be considered employees. That compensation includes "room and board for part of the year, equipment, apparel, tickets to both home and road games, footwear, access to nutrition and medical professionals, exclusive use of certain facilities, and academic support."

Haskins and Myrthil said they're not expecting big dollars for playing basketball. Dartmouth testified that the team only brings in revenue of $458,000 a year.

"Just to have a voice at the table is what's important to us," Haskins said.

Haskins, who's from Minneapolis, said his grandmother is the only member of his family that has been in a union before, and only briefly just before she retired.

"Initially my mom was telling me, 'Don't do it, don't get kicked off the team,'" he recalled when he told his parents about his union efforts. But he said they eventually came around and supported him.

Some Dartmouth alumni at a recent gamealso had mixed feelings about the union effort. At a recent Dartmouth road game at Columbia University, Douglas Murphy, Dartmouth class of '78 and a former basketball player at the school, said he was happy to see the union effort.

"I take my hat off to them," said Murphy, who was a union member himself for 36 years as a state employee in New York. "I wish we had a union when I was playing. We had some big problems with staff when I was playing. We needed it."

One section away in the Columbia bleachers, Ed Burns, Dartmouth class of 1985, said he's worried about what unionization would mean to schools that aren't in big dollar athletic conferences, such as the Ivy League where Dartmouth plays.

"You're not talking about Michigan football or Alabama football," he said, referring to two of the most profitable college sports teams. "Will the Ivy League schools get together and say, 'We'll just offer club sports?' I hope not, but that could be the long-term implications of this."

Burns, who has worked in management and never been in a union in his career, said he's a sports fan and doesn't object to professional sports unions that have helped athletes to earn millions.

"They're probably good for sports," he said. "They were probably inevitable."

Will union effort spread to other teams?

Haskins and Myrthil said they hope the victory of the union vote at Dartmouth will spark union votes on many other teams, including the big dollar programs. It will be an uphill fight, especially at many major sports programs that are most often found at state schools, not private schools, and are under different labor laws that can make organizing more difficult, depending on the state.

The NCAA has long sought to prohibit students from receiving any compensation for athletics, other than scholarships and some modest stipend money. But the Supreme Court opened the door for [*greater compensation*](https://www.cnn.com/2021/06/21/politics/ncaa-supreme-court/index.html) for student athletes in 2021 when it ruled unanimously that NCAA rules prohibiting compensation to student athletes violated antitrust laws. The ruling opened the door for college athletes at the big money sports to start getting money from use of their [*name, image and likeness*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/03/politics/ncaa-college-sports-at-risk-nil/index.html), or NIL, in endorsement deals. But proposals to [*allow direct pay*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/05/sport/ncaa-new-tier-to-compensate-athletes-directly-spt-intl/index.html) from the schools has yet to be approved by the NCAA.

And the idea of union representation for college athletes was endorsed by a coach at least one major sports powerhouse. In a press conference soon after winning the college football championship, then-University of Michigan coach Jim Harbaugh said it was time for athletes to get a share of the wealth being produced by college sports, and that unions would be the way for that to happen. Michigan reported football revenue of $131 million in the most recent year to the Department of education.

"And it's long past time to let the student-athletes share in the ever-increasing revenues. I mean, it's billions," said Harbaugh, who has since taken a coaching position in the NFL. "And there needs to be a voice for the young people, the student-athletes. Right now, there is no voice... I have nothing against unions. That's the next step, fellas. I think that's the way you've got to go. That's what I'd like to see change in college athletics."

But in all these cases, both in sports and withcampus jobs outside of sports, the students being asked to join a union movement are only going to be around for a limited number of years.

Clock ticking on campus union fights

An organizing drive can take a year, and a first contract can take longer than that. It's not like trying to organize workers at a factory where the staff could be looking at long-term careers and expect to benefit from any contract that is reached.

Another recently organized student union at Dartmouth is still seeking its first contract. The Graduate Organized Laborers of Dartmouth represents graduate teaching and research assistants. It is affiliate with the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America, one of the non-academic unions that has been very active in organizing in higher education.

Logan Mann, a third-year graduate engineering student who is on GOLD-UE's bargaining committee, said the initial organizing effort for the union started in fall of 2021, and that while it would have liked to have reached a contract already, they went into the effort knowing it could be a long fight.

But that they had no choice, given their working reality, Mann said.

"We're surrounded by so much wealth and don't have any of it ourselves," he said. "There's a crushing cost of living and rent increases with no pay increases in sight."

But even though many union supporters will be graduating and leaving the school soon, he said the union is there for however long the fight for a contract takes.

"It's an interesting challenge," he said. "We have 25% turnover every year. The turnover, along with the fact that everyone will leave eventually means that our primary mission is one, to get a contract, and two is to develop future leaders in the union."

By Chris Isidore, CNN

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