

# GSU NEWS

fall 2009

## *Issue No. 3: INVOLVEMENT*

Fall is the cruelest quarter. Three months ago, the summer seemed so long. If you were on your way to start a new life as a grad student, Maybe you were even anxious for the summer to be over. Now you're here, dragged through the gauntlet of deans and chairs and advisors and registrars. The summer was short, and the year ahead looms like a droning lecture. What have you gotten yourself into? Did you really mean to come here? Did you really study here last year? Or—sorry—has it already been six, seven, ten years? Do you belong? How are you going to face everything that comes at you? It's OK, you're smart. And fortunate too, even privileged, maybe. But now—look—you have a complaint. A gripe, an annoyance, a deep and dirty bit of injustice, a grievance—and what are they going to do about it? Who listens to you? Who speaks to you? Who speaks with you? What are you—what are we—going to do?

That's where this issue of *GSU News* begins. What does it mean for you, as a student, an academic, a worker, to be "involved"? Do academics have political responsibilities—to intervene in the debates of the wider world? Should students care about activism, about engaging in their campus community to change some small bit of the world? And do grad student workers have any decent alternative but to organize to demand a say in our own affairs? What are the possibilities and pitfalls of politics, activism, organizing? What are you going to do? You might start by joining Graduate Students United, GSU.



*A volunteer GSU organizer speaking to the crowd.*

# NEWS FROM GSU



## GSU AND NATIONAL UNIONS (on the question of affiliation)

After several years of organizing, grad student labor unions such as GSU tend to face a critical question: should they become members in an outside union, and if so, which one? There are advantages to being independent, such as having the sole agency to collectively decide how the organization is structured and choose which issues to campaign around. Membership in another union, however, brings arguably greater benefits without necessarily compromising autonomy: paid, full-time organizers, assistance from members elsewhere, improved organizational visibility, and legal representation if needed. It also brings responsibilities: union members would pay higher dues, once we begin working under a union-negotiated contract; and we would be expected to show solidarity with grad students at other schools who face challenges like ours.

The process by which the members of an independent union become members of another, larger union is called affiliation. For the past several months, the GSU Affiliation Committee has been investigating the possibility of affiliation. So far we have held open meetings with American Federation of Teachers, the Industrial Workers of the World, and the American Association of University Professors. All GSU members have been welcome to attend these meetings, and are also welcome to help plan further the way in which GSU decides on affiliation. We will be inviting representatives of major unions to return to campus for open fora in which members can ask questions of the organizers directly. We will hold a series of "GSU 101" workshops, which will cover some of the basics of grad student union organizing.

And sometime this year we will hold our third online referendum, in which members will decide on whether to affiliate.



## RECENT ACTIVITY

GSU spent the summer preparing to enrich the university's fall orientation events by informing incoming students about their graduate student union. After these events we held our own GSU orientation, with lasagna, on Friday, Oct. 2. We are now happy to welcome a new cohort of GSU members, and we extend our support and encouragement to all U of C grad students, new and old.



## MEETING SCHEDULE

This quarter, GSU plans to hold alternating "business meetings" and "organizing meetings," Tuesdays at 5:30 in Haskell Hall room 102, beginning with a business meeting on Oct. 6. Contact [gsu@riseup.net](mailto:gsu@riseup.net) to confirm the schedule.



## CURRENT CAMPAIGNS

**Tuition:** GSU calls for an elimination of all tuition for students in Advanced Residence, Pro Forma, and Extended Residence (see p. 4).

**Job availability:** GSU calls for sufficient access to teaching jobs for all grad students (see p. 4).

**Healthcare:** GSU continues to work with CHART (Coalition for Healthcare Access, Responsibility and Transparency) to improve access to healthcare for all members of the U. of Chicago community.

**Childcare:** GSU would like to begin a campaign for on-campus childcare. If this affects you, we need your help!

*To get involved, write [gsu@riseup.net](mailto:gsu@riseup.net).*

# “DO ACADEMICS HAVE POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITIES?”

(survey)

*We posed the above question to our members. Selected answers are printed below.*

1. Academics and intellectuals often live lives of privilege accorded by their education and status. With all privilege comes responsibility. In the case of academics, accepting this responsibility may mean using their gifts and training to challenge orthodoxies of thought that maintain social control. American academics have a particular responsibility to institutions of higher learning in this regard, given that their colleagues often provide the “expert opinion” essential to the successful coercion of their countrymen and women into support for policies creating untold misery for people the world over.

2. Academics are faced with a choice: to become intellectuals, or to become experts. If they become intellectuals, their work is fundamentally engaged with a polity—its social value depends on its insertion into public debate. But if academics become experts, their work becomes fundamentally disengaged—their social value depends on their ability to refrain from public debate and merely, at best, “apply” their knowledge to projects whose premises remain un-debatable.

3. Academics have a particular responsibility to direct their teaching and research in directions that benefit society. Otherwise the enormous amount of public and private money that pays for our work is all being thrown down the drain. The research grants, the tuition payments and financial aid, the private donations, the tax breaks we get for being non-profit...what is that but theft, and abuse of the public trust, if it does nothing but produce useless research that means nothing to anyone? Obviously some academic fields are more immediately useful than others, but there is no excuse for total withdrawal from the world. Those who are just out for themselves ought to get jobs in the for-profit sector instead.

4. Academics do have political responsibilities—to the wretched status quo. Our academic guilds, from the humanities to the social sciences, are less arranged to produce liberatory knowledge than to clothe existing institutions in the trappings of respectable society.

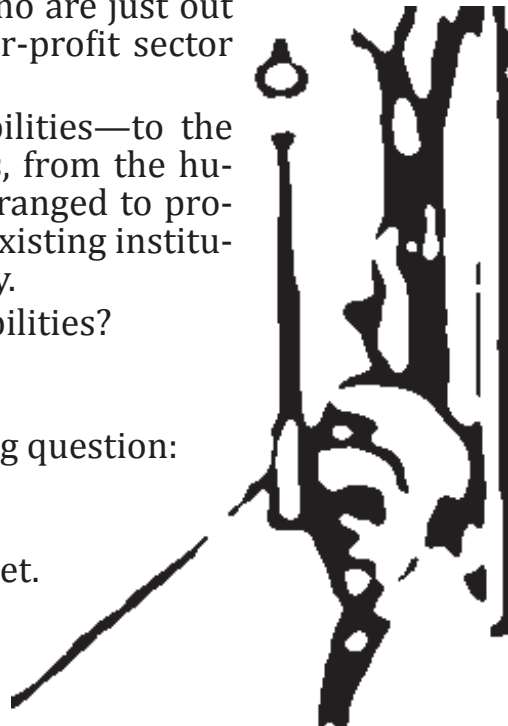
5. Don't all citizens have political responsibilities?



Next issue, we will be asking the following question:

**What Is GSU (to you)?**

Send responses to [gsu@riseup.net](mailto:gsu@riseup.net).



# STATEMENTS

(excerpt from GSU's Statement on Advanced Residence)

...It should be clear that the University of Chicago AR system presents a serious problem that can only be adequately resolved by the complete and immediate abolition of AR tuition and, by extension, of tuition assessed to students in Extended Residence (ER) and Pro Forma (PF). Short of this, we propose the following compromise measures:

- That AR (as well as ER and PF) tuition not be assessed to anybody who TA's or teaches for 2 out of the 4 quarters.
- That students who teach two classes in a single quarter be granted tuition remission for two quarters that year.
- That students who teach in non-degree-granting programs, or who work over 10 hours per week in non-teaching jobs on campus, thereby contributing to the intellectual production of the University, be awarded the same tuition remission as those who find TA or lecturer positions.
- That personal leave be granted to any student who requests it.
- That all tuition be suspended for at least for two years, during which time the strain put on the graduate teaching system by the GAI can be reduced.
- That if the administration does not take immediate action to reform its tuition policy, it waive all AR, ER, and PF tuition during the time it takes to reach its decision.

*(See full statement at [uchicagogsu.org](http://uchicagogsu.org).)*



(from a draft GSU Statement on Grad Student Teaching Job Availability)

Most grad students at the U of C know the misery of applying for scarce teaching jobs that are decided on erratic timetables by ghostly means. Being denied a job can give one a feeling of personal deficiency, even when the denial of a job is the result of structural-economic pressure and/or administration policy. This year's shortage of teaching jobs has affected a great many grad students, and the problem is collective, not personal.

The U of C needs an open process by which the terms and conditions of employment are negotiated and mutually agreed upon by grad students and administrators. At universities where grad students are represented by a labor union, such an agreement is called a collective bargaining contract.

Short of a contract, however, GSU proposes the following:

- A centralized job-posting and job-finding system.
- A course on teacher training through the Center for Teaching and Learning. As is standard for job training courses, those taking the course would be compensated at the rate they earn for their eventual jobs.
- More dissertation fellowships, to shrink the supply of teachers.
- A decrease to 15 in the number of students required for a course to get a TA.
- An increase in the number of internships and lectureships in the Core.
- More stand-alone instructorships.

## Take action:

- Attend public fora on AR tuition, Oct. 7, 12-1:20pm and Oct. 20, 5:15-6:15pm, in SS122.
- Complete the Ombudsperson's Teaching Availability Survey (stay tuned).
- Share your concerns on the GSU Facebook page (search "Graduate Students United").
- Write to Deputy Provost Cohen ([cjcohen@uchicago.edu](mailto:cjcohen@uchicago.edu)).



### SK HAND TOOLS ON STRIKE

On August 25, 70 employees of SK Hand Tools went on strike after the company unilaterally and without notice cancelled their health insurance. The workers are members of Teamsters Local 743, which also has about 2500 members at the University of Chicago. You may show support by visiting picket lines at 3535 W. 47th St. (Chicago) or 9500 W. 55th St. (McCook). For more information, and to donate to the strike support fund, visit [743teamsters.org](http://743teamsters.org).



### ADJUNCTS UNIONIZE IN MICH.

Non-tenure-track instructors at Michigan State University and Western Michigan University have voted to unionize. Both new bargaining units are affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers. Within the past two years, AFT Michigan-affiliated unions have also organized at the Central Michigan University, Wayne State University and Henry Ford Community College.



### NEW ADJUNCT UNIONS IN NYC

Part-time/adjunct faculty voted this spring to unionize at two private colleges in New York, the Manhattan School of Music and Cooper Union. The new unions are

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affiliated with the New York State United Teachers, affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association.



### UC WALK-OUT AND OCCUPATIONS

On September 24, an estimated 10-12,000 students and employees of the University of California stayed away from school and work, in response to a letter signed by 1200 faculty calling for the walk-out. Rallies were held on all ten UC campuses, and buildings were occupied at three campuses, including UC Santa Cruz, where the occupation continues as of press time. The actions were called to protest pay cuts and tuition increases proposed by the UC administration to help the state of California deal with its budget crisis.



### AAUP CAMPAIGNS FOR GRADS

The American Association of University Professors announced in June a campaign to end "at-whim" employment of contingent faculty, most of whom can currently be dismissed by their administrators without notice, with no review by fellow academics, no stated reasons, and no process for appeal. The AAUP also revised its Statement on Academic Freedom, with the purpose of strengthening its defense of grad student employee rights. Among other things, the new statement calls on universities to guarantee that

- work conditions and procedures for renewal be specified at the time of appointment;
- dismissal take place only after a hearing;
- graduate employees not be dismissed for participation in strikes or other labor actions; and
- notice be given one month before the end of an appointment as to whether the appointment will continue in the next term.

# THE DEPOLITICIZATION OF ACTIVISM

(a polemic on organizing and progressive politics, by Greg Gabrellas)

The history of campus activism is the history of single issues, which come and go without leaving a significant impact on students' political consciousness or organization. Hardly any students remember the most successful student campaign of recent years: the "Boot the Bell" campaign initiated in spring 2002 against ARAMARK's campus contract with Taco Bell. The "Boot the Bell" victory, students hoped, would generate a wider national student movement. Some of the students who had participated in "Boot the Bell" did continue to organize, but they turned away from campus—let alone national—politics and into neighborhood localism. In spite of modest victories, activism has remained depoliticized insofar as its goal has not been to spur political consciousness among students. Instead, activists have attempted to win limited campus-wide reforms by using conventional tactics such as direct actions and coalition building. All of these campaigns have started as a single issue, gradually formed a multi-group coalition, briefly captured the student imagination, and then dissolved. Activism seems to rise and fall with the regularity of the business cycle...

—Unless we can break the cycle.

The question is less one of students' motivation and commitment than it is one of strategy. For many, the purpose of student activism should simply be to build a community of progressive individuals. Perhaps they hold this view perhaps because they do not actually believe that substantive change in the University or the wider world is possible. When the wider political world does become an issue, activists tend to accept the priorities of "hot topics" and organize their campaigns around them. They do not consider whether and under what conditions localism and single-issues might transcend their immediacy and transform the world at large. As a consequence of this, there is little political dis-

ussion among activists, and most are averse to public debate. But without political discussion and debate—debate that addresses the most pressing strategic questions of the moment—there cannot be any serious attempt to change the world.

There is one organization that can potentially change this situation and place student politics on more coherent footing. Graduate Students United was founded in 2007 as a committee to begin discussing and working to unionize graduate student workers and the student-body as a whole. Since then it has grown to a burgeoning campus organization

*GSU has an explicit, purposeful goal: to transform the University to be more responsive to its students.*

*This, more than any number of progressive "issues," has the potential to politicize the student body.*

with a life of its own: regular meetings, social and political events, and networks of stewards in many departments of the University of Chicago.

What makes GSU unique among student organizations?

Simple: access to the University's inner workings, the graduate student lecturers, instructors and teaching assistants upon which the University depends for the College to function. When organized, graduate students can exert their collective strength to push forward changes in the University that were hitherto impossible, moving toward GSU's explicit, purposeful goal: to transform the University to be more responsive to its students. In the process, GSU has the potential to revitalize campus activism and student politics. Although GSU itself is politically neutral, insofar as it is a representative body of students and anyone can work through GSU to advance a political cause, progressives can use GSU as a forum to discuss political goals and strategies for students to pursue collectively. In this way the University of Chicago campus could be fruitfully politicized, thereby enriching our intellectual lives as well as our activist projects.

*Student unionization is not the end of student politics—it is the necessary, but difficult, beginning.*

# 7 YEARS OF CAMPUS POLITICS

(a report on major campaigns)

2002



*Campaign:* “Boot the Bell”

*Organization:* Anti-Sweatshop Coalition (later re-named Students Organized and United with Labor; SOUL)

*Goals:* Work with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers to boycott the Taco Bell franchise at the University of Chicago campus, due to the business’s abuse of its workers.

*Tactics:* High profile events, meetings with administrators, coalition-building

*Result:* Successfully pressured the University not to renew its contract with the Taco Bell company

2004



*Campaign:* Save Grove Parc

*Organization:* Student-Tenant Organizing Project (STOP, later re-named Southside Together Organizing for Power)

*Goals:* Work with low-income housing residents to prevent the University’s acquisition and demolition of the Grove Parc’s 504 public housing units south of campus

*Tactics:* Saul Alinsky-style community organizing

*Result:* Successfully pressured the University to back down on its attempts to acquire Grove Parc; created a grass-roots tenant organization that exists to this day

2007  
Spring



*Campaign:* Killer Coke

*Organization:* SOUL

*Goals:* Participate in nation-wide Students Against Sweatshop campaign to pressure universities to stop purchasing Coca-Cola products through its dining contractors, due to anti-union practices by the Coca-Cola Corporation in Columbia

*Tactics:* Teach-ins, direct actions

*Result:* Campaign unsuccessful

Fall



*Campaign:* Save Darfur

*Organization:* Students Taking Action Now—Darfur (STAND)

*Goals:* Pressure the University to shed all investments related to the Khartoum government in Sudan, which was accused of carrying out genocide against the people of the southern region of Darfur

*Tactics:* Teach-ins, direct actions

*Result:* Campaign unsuccessful

2008



*Campaign:* Aramark-Student Worker Alliance

*Organization:* SOUL & Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)

*Goals:* Work with Aramark workers at the University and with Teamsters Local 743 to win workers a better contract

*Tactics:* Joint meetings with workers and students, coalition-building, rallies

*Result:* Debated; the campaign did provide a means to connect students with people in the work place

2009



*Campaign:* Stop the MFI

*Organizations:* Committee for Open Research on Economy and Society (CORES), SDS, GSU

*Goals:* Working with faculty to stop the University from establishing a “Milton Friedman Institute for Research in Economics”

*Tactics:* Coalition-building, rallies, educational events, debate in faculty senate

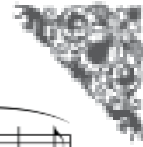
*Result:* The administration agreed to minor changes in the Institute’s plan

# THE MAROONED DISSERTATION WRITERS

(a GSU folk epic in three parts)



## *Part I: Orientation*



Now come all you good students and listen to me well.  
Come all you good workers and all of you who dwell  
In the shadows of this mighty university,  
Beneath these towers made of stone—or some say ivory.

I was in this fine city in the fall five years ago,  
When I saw a famous scholar who was speaking loud and low,  
Saying, “How would you like, young fellow, to study and to know  
Everything on this fair earth, and everything below?”

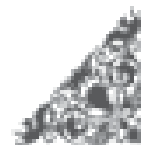
Well, me being out of the work then, to the scholar I did say,  
“Just tell me where to sign up, and I’ll sign up right this day.”  
With all the scholar’s talking, he signed up quite a crew.  
We agreed to keep on stud’ying till our studies they were through.

First we took our classes, then we wrote up our MAs.  
Then we took exams, and we proposed to dissertate.  
We went and did our research in the field so far away.  
Then we looked into our pockets and we found we had no pay.

So we took on jobs a’ teachin’ and we worked our brains full sore.  
Then we looked into our pockets and we went to teach some more.  
But when we got our paychecks there was almost nothing there:  
We had spent it all on school fees and on our own healthcare.

And so we got together and we asked for better pay.  
And so we got together and we asked to have a say  
In all the ways this school’s run right now and long to come,  
So you coming students won’t have to do like we have done.

Now all of you good students who have listened to me well,  
You came to learn of heaven, but you learned a bit of hell.  
While others work in blood and sweat, our ink is agony.  
But together we can rewrite this whole university.



GSU organizes graduate student workers and campaigns for better wages, healthcare, and working conditions. To join, email [gsu@riseup.net](mailto:gsu@riseup.net) or visit [uchicagogsu.org](http://uchicagogsu.org).

 by Graduate Students United. Labor donated. 