


gsu news


spring 2010

A quarterly newsletter of Graduate Students United at the University of Chicago

Issue No. 4: Affiliation



I am the sum of all my social relations. I am the love who comes to me in hours dark. I am the line I draw between the misery of others and the struggle of us. I am the union that I am in, and the union is me, us.




affiliation can also make us stronger, and we might need this strength for the road that lies ahead - a road that could lead us to formal recognition by the university administration, and eventually to a decent labor contract for grad student employees at the University of Chicago.

This issue of GSU News is devoted to affiliation. Pages 4-5 have been given to the GSU Affiliation Committee to describe and assess the possibility of Graduate Students United joining a larger union. Our decision will affect GSU's development for years to come, so we'd better make it well. As is the case any time organizations unite, affiliation might demand that we adapt to the ways of the organization we join. But

In addition to our spread on affiliation, in this issue we also keep you up to date with GSU's most recent activities (p. 2), and with developments in university politics around the world (p. 3); and we continue to open our pages to debates on the meaning of coming together through organizing and solidarity (pp. 6-7). We finish (p. 8) with a song.

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news from GSU



HEALTH CARE: A YEAR OF NON-SILENCE

Usually, health dilemmas happen in quiet places. Doctors' offices, ER waiting rooms, insurance cubicles. But 2009 was not a quiet year.

GSUers brought something to this year's broader struggle over health care: a focus on the role of the University. A burst of email discontent - sparked by 5-month waits for OB-GYN care at the SCC - led to a feisty open forum in February. The Administration responded by lowering wait times.

Mobilized, students kept going. GSUers united around the fear that later-year students face when they must shoulder the full cost of insurance. Students crafted a demand: health insurance should go to all students who work on campus. They also birthed a coalition encompassing neighborhood groups, unions, and undergraduates. The coalition drafted a broad platform calling for decent neighborhood care, fair campus jobs, SCC improvements, insurance for student workers, and democratic decision-making. In a referendum, the GSUers overwhelmingly approved.

GSU pursued this broad strategy at a June open forum, which prompted county- and national-level advocacy. In the fall, GSUers regrouped in a focused committee. The committee pressed SHIRC to make its decisions about health insurance democratically. GSU challenged SHIRC and the Administration to document health care problems through a survey - and the Administration agreed.

GSUers scrambled to help write the survey before Christmas. Soon they'll be scrambling to read the results, to link them to national concerns, and to talk about their meaning. Carefully, seriously, planfully - but not quietly.

MEETING SCHEDULE

GSU meets Tuesdays at 5:30 in Haskell Hall room 102, alternating weekly between "business meetings" and "organizing meetings." At **business meetings** we take care of general strategic questions as well as the little things that are necessary to keep the organizing going. **Organizing meetings** serve as workshops where we develop plans for signing up new members in individual departments or work units, and for ensuring that GSU addresses the needs and concerns of all its members. Contact 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.

Job Availability: GSU calls for sufficient access to teaching jobs for all grad students.

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. To get involved, write gsu@riseup.net.

GSU T-SHIRTS!

\$15

grey and black

sizes s m l xl

write gsu@riseup.net



labor news

UIUC GRADS STRIKE, WIN

On Nov. 23 the members of the Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign voted to ratify a contract with the university's Board of Trustees. The vote followed a two-day-long strike which won the strikers protection for tuition waivers; an additional two weeks of unpaid parental leave; increases in the University's contribution to health care premiums (reaching 75% in the third and final year of the contract); raises on the minimum salary, totaling ten percent over three years. The union also succeeded in removing from the contract several regressive proposals by the administration, including furloughs, "in-kind" payment, a rescision of grievances related to discrimination, and a "scope of the agreement" clause that would have prevented the GEO from re opening bargaining in the event of a change to employment conditions for graduate employees at UIUC. The GEO victory fell during the "Education is NOT for SALE" Global Week of Action, which was organized from Germany and included demonstrations and teach-ins across Europe, Africa, and the United States in support of public higher education in opposition to the ongoing corporatization and privatization of our public higher education system.



EUROPE-WIDE PROTESTS AGAINST 'BOLOGNA PROCESS'

Students at Vienna's Art Academy went on strike in late October and occupied their campus building. The University of Vienna also became the site of protests, including the occupation of an auditorium on October 22. These events helped spark a series of demonstrations and occupations across Europe in opposition to the so-called Bologna Process, an inter-governmental agreement to standardize the European university system and bring it closer to the U.S. model of higher education. Administrative attempts to cut costs and introduce tuition fees have led protesters to argue that the Bologna Process aims to bring universities increasingly into the logic of corporate capital. For further information:

<http://www.malen-nach-zahlen.at/>
<http://www.facebook.com/unserereuni>



FUN FACT

The Chronicle of Higher Education reports that., in 2007-08, U of C President Robert Zimmer made \$927,814. That means his salary was 206 times what a graduate student would have made that year for 3 quarters as a teaching assistant, or 88 times the wages of a graduate student teaching a stand-alone course for a full year. Since GSU won a wage increase for grad students during the summer of after the 2008, the president's 2007-08 salary is now only about 62 times the income of a grad student. The president's salary is also the equivalent to a full year of AR tuition paid by 394 graduate students. It's comforting to know our tuition money is put to good use!

SHOULD GSU AFFILIATE

*Graduate Students United, your grad student union, could join
gain strength in numbers. What do you*

-affiliation options-

SERVICE EMPLOYEES INTERNATIONAL UNION

The SEIU is a powerful international union that was established in Chicago in 1921. Advantages of affiliating with such a large union include access to their legal resources and training and paid staff for an organizing campaign at the U of C. *SEIU already represents workers here at the U of C*, so their experience in dealing with the administration may be to our advantage too. The dues that we would pay upon affiliation are not yet set, but one proposal is that workers would pay monthly dues of two and a half hours wage. Members who are not working would not have to pay dues, nor would dues be charged to anybody until a contract with the U of C administration is in place. Some people, however, might have reservations towards SEIU's national politics, such as their ongoing battles with other unions.

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS

The AAUP is the leading professional body in the US advocating for faculty and grad students in the areas of academic freedom, shared governance, and union rights. It represents unionized faculty at 57 universities, some of whom are jointly affiliated with AAUP and AFT. Graduate student members have all rights and privileges accorded to faculty members, including the right to hold office and to vote in national elections. In recent years the *AAUP has done a great deal to defend the workplace interests of graduate students*. Most importantly, in 2009 the Association approved a Recommended Institutional Regulation on Graduate Student Employees that provides administrators with a set of grad student job appointment guidelines.

AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS - ILLINOIS FEDERATION OF TEACHERS

For graduate students employed as teachers, the AFT-IFT might seem a natural choice. IFT represents 103,000 teachers in Illinois, and it recently ran a successful campaign with Graduate Employees Organization at UIUC, where the university administration agreed to meet their demands after only two days of striking. The *AFT also represents more graduate student employees than any other union federation in North America*, and it has important experience with the specific challenges involved in graduate student organizing. Although it is a smaller organization than SEIU, it is much larger than the AAUP or the IWW; it has significant clout in shaping national educational policy, and it has significant financial resources, to devote to organizing

INDUSTRIAL WORKERS OF THE WORLD

The IWW differs from the AFT-IFT and the SEIU in its emphasis on organizing even if its members do not obtain formal recognition or a contract. *If GSU seeks and fails to obtain formal recognition, it is possible that the AFT-IFT or SEIU would withdraw support, while the IWW would not*. Also unlike with the AFT-IFT or SEIU, GSU members would begin paying IWW dues immediately upon affiliation (rather than after signing our first contract); these dues are also lower than other unions' dues, and GSU would keep half of these dues to spend as it chooses. The IWW is the smallest of our potential affiliates; but it has a large group of volunteer organizers who would help with GSU's campaign.

WITH A LARGER UNION?

a larger union federation, in order to pool our resources and think? Let us know at gsu@riseup.net.

-frequently asked questions-

Are grad students really “workers” eligible to form unions?

Since many grad students work for wages that in turn pay for their own sustenance, there is no doubt that grad students are workers. While any group of workers may form a union, the real question is whether the workers’ employer officially recognizes the union as an agent for collective bargaining. Grad students of private universities must either be voluntarily recognized by the administration of their own university, or through the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). Unfortunately, voluntary recognition from the university may prove difficult, and in 2004 the Bush-appointed NLRB overturned a 2000 decision that private university graduate students may be considered workers. A more labor-friendly White House means that chances are good this decision will be overturned in favor of graduate student workers.

Have other grad students formed unions?

Graduate students across North America, including those at private universities, have formed unions for the purpose of winning collective bargaining rights. Many of these unions stay in close contact with one another and have formed a Coalition of Graduate Employee Unions which provides many resources regarding graduate student unions on their website www.cgeu.org.

Would it affect student/faculty relations if we affiliated with an outside organization to represent grad students?

Hopefully, only for the better. Most faculty understand that a grad student union gives students the ability to speak collectively alongside faculty, and not against them. Moreover, if we affiliated with AFT-IFT or AAUP, then we would be joining orga-

nizations that already have large numbers of faculty as members. Nonetheless, we should also acknowledge that occasionally a faculty member might be found to be mistreating a student--often without realizing it. A union can help students to address such situations without fearing repercussions from the faculty members in question.

Does GSU need to affiliate in order to be recognized by the administration?

No. The administration is free at any time to recognize GSU and begin the process of collective bargaining. But the administration is unlikely to do this without feeling pressure from a powerful, well-organized union. We can attempt to exert this level of pressure purely by relying on our internal organization; but the experience of other grad student unions suggests that our prospects are more promising if we have the support of a large national union.

How much would dues be if we affiliate?

This depends on the organizing strategy of the union we affiliate with. Typically grad students do not pay dues to a union they have affiliated with until the union has signed its first contract (and won a pay raise for its members). Until then, dues would remain at their current level as set by GSU (\$5 per year).

Would GSU maintain its autonomy?

For the most part, yes. Every potential affiliate has emphasized that GSU would remain in charge of its internal affairs. It is true that different unions have different organizational norms which we might be required to respect. At the same time, we would become full members of the organization we affiliate with, with the right to participate in its national or international democratic process.

DON'T BE A GOOD ORGANIZER

(response to "Activists into Organizers," in *GSU News* spring 2009)

by *Duff Morton*

Many nights, lumbering home from meetings in shabby church basements or abandoned classrooms, I've wondered if I'm a good organizer. So it was with a familiar pang of self-doubt that I read the paean to organizing written by NYU unionists in the spring 2009 issue of *GSU News*. Good organizers, the NYUers argued, differ from activists because the organizers promote others' voices rather than their own. Mostly, they listen. They raise consciousness. They enable a community to speak for itself. I am very sympathetic to many of these methods, and I admire the NYU union's achievements. Nonetheless, I have a concern.

The rhetoric of organizing typically posits two different levels of speech. There is the real, substantive speech of the members speech

that takes positions on issues, like pay raises or child care problems. And then there is the shadowy speech of the organizer, which does not take positions, but rather helps others to speak. In fact, it barely resembles speech at all; it mostly listens. Organizers' speech is a form inside of which members' speech takes shape as substance.

These distinctions become troublesome because they produce a dangerous ethical sequestration. The formal appears as a necessary first stage to be surpassed, nothing but a set of rules. Organizing rhetoric alleges that all of the important ethical conversations, about the real issues, take place at the substantive level, by "the

members themselves." Formal-level speech exists in an ethically-neutral zone, aiming only at helping people speak for themselves.

Instead, the reverse inevitably occurs: the crucial ethical issues of the day get negotiated via ostensibly "formal" debates about "process" or "organizing strategy." But, cripplingly, the interlocutors cannot make the ethical stakes clear, because the conversation takes place on "merely formal" grounds and denies that it is about substance. Even worse, since they occur

in the arcane formal register proper for self-abnegating organizers, these conversations frequently exclude "the members."

What to do, then? Certainly not flee from the realities of power by knighting everyone an organizer. At

the same time, not mistake the realities of power for an injunction to Realpolitik, and therefore endow an enlightened coordinating body with the responsibility for all decisions. Instead, I think, we need to hold that all debates are ethically laden. People never speak for themselves and always for others, and organizers do and should writhe with substantive desires as irrepressible as everyone else's. Thus even the still-unorganized should opine about meeting-rules, and even organizers should speak strongly on the relative merits of pay raises versus more vacation time.

But we may feel legitimately concerned that different people do different jobs inside an organization and that these differences

We can value having many voices speak. We can also value humility, and hence the realization that one must listen because one might be in error. But we should recognize that the articulation of these values is not merely a procedural precondition for substantive conversation. The articulation of values is the stuff of conversation itself.

in task can create imbalances of power. We may want to correct these by sometimes muzzling the more powerful, like organizers, and by listening rather than speaking.

The key is to accomplish this not by creating a special, formal sphere called “process” or “organizing” that precedes substantive conversation, but by articulating the values that underlie our organization and by making them into an issue for debate. But we should not reserve these values for a select few, nor should we sequester them by making them preliminary to the conversation. There is no absolute

right to ‘speak for oneself,’ or to anything else. One value balances with all of the others.

Of course, good organizations already do this every day. To recognize it is to acknowledge the importance of striving to replace the dual model of listener-organizers and speaker-members with a singular ethics engaging everyone. It means knowing that a good organizer, though she has a particular task, is ultimately just a good member. It means struggling, humbly, but not without rage and desire, to make good together. 🍏

(a survey)

What Is Solidarity?

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

“

Some years ago in an argument with John Dewey, Jane Addams stated that all antagonisms are unreal. She said (as noted by Dewey): ‘The antagonism of institutions was always unreal; it was simply due to the injection of personal attitude & reaction; & then instead of adding to the recognition of meaning, it delayed and distorted it.’ Thus, I propose: Solidarity is reality.”

“Solidarity is the underlying unity that binds members of a social system or community together. The modern labor movement and its intellectuals were the first to recognize that the development of capitalism created not only social disorder, but the possibility of freedom and unity at a higher level than ever before. But recognition of this fact carried grave social responsibilities: “an injury to one is an injury to all,” became the slogan of rising labor. With the decomposition of the labor movement over the 20th century, the term “solidarity” began to refer to the passive endorsement of trends over which activists had no control, to the detriment of labor worldwide. The recovery of the early meaning of solidarity, and its political content, is an urgent task to revitalize the labor movement and--if it is not too late--reconstitute the politics necessary to unlock its emancipatory potential.”

“Solidarity is acting in commitment to higher education. GSU members teach at a university level. To support GSU is to join together in solidarity in support of higher education and the people who make it possible.”

“Solidarity is giving something you don’t have to someone who doesn’t want it....But, no, seriously, I would pose a counter-question, “solidarity for whom?” For grad student employees at an elite university, solidarity is (or should be?) a practice of attentive listening, constructive questioning, and hospitality, in the service of building social movements. It is not principally a moral relation, but one that is political, and crucial to the overcoming of structural wrongs.”

“Solidarity begins after the third drink. ☹️



Next issue, we will be asking the following

question:

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

Send responses to
gsu@riseup.net

THE MAROONED DISSERTATION WRITERS

(a GSU folk epic in three parts)



Once more now students, workers, here the truth it will be told:
It won't be long, now gather 'round, come young and come old;
Come all of you who seek and make the beautiful and true.
I am a graduate student, and I wish the best to you.

Oh, graduate studying is the hardest work I've ever done.
It sucks away your spirit, and it kills all of your fun.
In exchange for future dreams you give up years and hours.
And while others sleep in poppy fields, we write on paper flowers.

While muscles wither in our arms we press our keys to dust.
We write about libido and forget about our lust.
We theorize utopias and live a life of slaves.
All for an ounce of prestige and some letters on our graves.

We spend our youth in musty halls and laboratories cold.
We spend our nights in beds of books with lovers ages old.
Each day we say tomorrow—then at last we will be free...
Until we're tenured and retired—then we'll finally live our dreams.

We dream of picking up our pens as swords to save the world.
Instead we work for warlords under flags of greed unfurled.
We teach of revolutions we forgot how to believe.
We've got to raise our pens to change the University.

I am a graduate student and I wish the best to you.
Let's get together and transform this system through and through.
Now if we act in union there is nothing we can't do.
Come all you students, workers, now, come join in GSU.

GSU organizes graduate student workers and campaigns for better wages, healthcare, and working conditions. To join, email gsu@riseup.net or see uchicagogsu.org

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