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Update from the Labor Movement Trenches: COGS-UE Local 896's Second Contract and the Power of Collective Action

Julie Schmid

On February 25, 1999, the membership of COGS-UE Local 896, the union that represents graduate employees at the University of Iowa, ratified our second contract with the Iowa Board of Regents. Our new contract is a testimony to the important role that the labor movement has come to play here at the UI. By building on the gains that we negotiated in our first contract, this contract reinforces the importance of collective bargaining in our ongoing struggle to improve the day-to-day living conditions of graduate employees and significantly strengthens the workplace rights of all teaching and research assistants at the University of Iowa (for a discussion of our first contract, please see my article in *Workplace* 1.1).

Negotiations are only one part of the collective bargaining process, however. As those of us who are members of COGS have been reminded in recent months, extra-contractual activities such as rallies, community forums, and membership education are integral to achieving a fair contract and reforming the academic workplace. This short report will outline the economic gains that we've achieved in our new contract and describe how this second contract will directly affect the material conditions of the TAs and RAs at the UI. Moreover, because the health of the academic labor movement ultimately depends upon building a strong, active membership, I will also briefly discuss how membership activity over the past few months influenced the negotiations process.

Our second contract goes into effect on July 1, 1999. It includes mental and dental health insurance coverage for graduate employees, affordable family health care coverage for graduate employees with dependent children and spouses, and a minimum salary of \$13,720 for half-time RAs and TAs for academic year 1999/2000 and \$14,130 for academic year 2000/2001. It also includes a memorandum of understanding between the Board of Regents and the Union regarding the Union's right to assist graduate employees with cases involving sexual harassment and discrimination in the workplace.

These gains are significant for a number of reasons. First, they emphasize COGS's commitment to fighting the economic exploitation of graduate employees at the University of Iowa. At present, the state of Iowa has a 900 million-dollar budget surplus. It is an outrage that the largest public-sector employer in the state of Iowa pays 2,700 of its employees poverty-level wages. Our union-negotiated raises over the past three years have helped to lessen the financial burden faced by graduate employees at the UI.

Our second contract also emphasizes our on-going commitment to affordable, quality health care as a basic human right. We've added full mental and dental health care coverage to the health care plan that we negotiated in our first contract and negotiated an employer contribution of 70% to family health care coverage. Research- and teaching-assistants with families make up about one-quarter of the total graduate employee population here at Iowa. For the first time in the University's history, graduate employees with families can afford health care coverage for their children.

Finally, the inclusion of the human rights memorandum of understanding in our contract represents a major victory for COGS-UE Local 896. In the state of Iowa, human rights/non-discrimination language is not a mandatory topic of bargaining and during the negotiation of our first contract the University refused to discuss this issue with us. Added to the University's recalcitrance at the bargaining table were President Mary Sue Coleman's frequent public statements against including a non-discrimination clause in the COGS contract. Over the past three years, the members of COGS have engaged in public protests, rallies, and community forums, in order to educate both the membership and the community on this issue. The fact that we were able to negotiate the human rights memorandum in the second contract reinforces how important member activism is to the continued success of this local.

Ultimately, of course, all of the improvements that we've negotiated in both our contracts were the result of collective action on the part of the members of COGS. Public employees in the state of Iowa are not allowed to strike. Therefore, putting public pressure on the University through organizing the membership and educating the community at large is the most effective bargaining tool we have. Publicly visible events such as the Martin Luther King day protest in 1997, the grade-in in December 1998, and our rally in February 1999 highlighted both the economics and the ethics (or lack thereof) of the University's position on human rights, on health care coverage for grad. employees, and on paying employees a living wage. These events, which caught the attention of other UI employees, community members, and the news media, directly affected our ability to negotiate the human rights memorandum, dental and mental health coverage, and family health care coverage.

Our on-going collective action over the past two years has been integral to building public support for our union. It has also been a necessary component of our developing class-consciousness. Through public demonstrations and rallies with the other unions on campus and through coalition-building activities, such as the forum on childcare that we held this winter, we have begun challenge the larger community's view of academics as an elite class. Through our coalition work, moreover, we have begun to address our own class amnesia. By talking to union members from the other union locals on campus, attending their rallies, and strategizing cross-union collective actions, it has become clear to us that we have much in common with other workers at the UI and, by extension, with other workers around the nation and the world.

Ultimately, the continued success COGS-UE Local 896 will depend upon our ongoing commitment to organizing and activating our membership and to educating and working with community members. One of the phrases that I have heard over and over again during my three-year involvement with the UE is the adage, "a contract is only as strong as its membership." While this statement is, I suppose, self-evident, those of us involved in the academic unionization movement would do well to keep it in mind. For those of us who are active in COGS-UE Local 896, this most recent bargaining cycle has provided us with the opportunity to test this adage and renew our commitment to transforming the academic workplace through organizing and collective action.

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