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BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE GRADUATE UNION

or, The Epic Importance of the Mundane

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At some point, a union must stop acting like a rebellion and start acting like what it is: a legitimate, democratic institution whose mission is to make life better for its members and to protect them from unwarranted encroachments upon their livelihoods.

—Steven W. Patterson, former Bargaining Chair, Wayne State GEOC

There is possibly some irony that once the mobilized rebellion of a graduate student organizing drive successfully storms the institutional ramparts, it finds itself turned into an institution, a legally recognized and responsible organization. Before recognition, the focus of the proto-union is entirely upon mobilizing. The end goal of action is well-defined: the creation of a democratic organization that gives graduate assistants collective say in the terms and conditions of their employment. This ideal is an actively motivating one for many. After recognition, the goals of the union become multiple, less clear and less actively motivating in and of themselves. The strength or weakness of a contract's grievance procedure, for example, will probably not motivate many rank and file members to become more actively involved in their union. The democratic ideal becomes intertwined with the mundanity of its implementation, with work that is daily, sustained, long term. The work of the union needs to take into account more than resolving the present crisis, whatever that crisis may be.

The history of graduate student employee unions has focused almost entirely on the battle for recognition, but now that more and more unions are recognized all the time, we need to begin a consideration of the recognized union and what sort of issues face the particular situation of the graduate student employee union. Our purpose in this paper, which was first presented as part of the Graduate Student Caucus panel at last winter's annual Modern Language Association Conference, is to begin what we hope will be an ongoing discussion that reflects this new phase in the history of the graduate employee union, and that will begin to examine the particular problems faced by graduate unions and how graduate unions function. Our relatively cursory research indicates that many graduate employee unions unfortunately do not run well, and some of them barely run at all. We've fought long and hard for these unions, and now it's time to make them work for us.

A recognized union is a very different organization than the union fighting for recognition. The recognized union has to function on several different levels simultaneously and has to engage its members and the university in ways that it simply does not before recognition. The graduate student employee union must continue mobilizing, as it does before recognition, but it also has to balance those activities

with those required of the union in its role as a legal institution obligated to represent its members for the purpose of collective bargaining. The university is legally obligated to negotiate with a recognized union, which is what the union drive was all about. The fight is no longer for legitimation, but a struggle with how to organize this new legal institution that is now legally bound to represent its members for the purposes of collective bargaining, and the graduate employee union faces obstacles--determined by who we are and by outside forces--for which traditional union paradigms simply do not need to accommodate.

I. Conditions Particular to Graduate Student Employee Unions

The traditional labor union consists of members that hope to keep their jobs until retirement. A member-run union, therefore, consists of people who have generally worked at their jobs for several years, and the leadership of that union has generally been involved with the union for several years in addition to that. They have had the opportunity to know the conditions of their jobs and have come to know their co-workers. They have had the opportunity to learn about how the union runs, and have learned the procedures for filing grievances and for conducting labor/management meetings, for example. While most members of the bargaining unit have not read the contract completely, many have had experiences with parts of it, and there will always be someone who knows to direct an employee with a problem to the union steward. The traditional labor union can count on those who have been in the bargaining unit for several years to talk to their co-workers to promote union organizing, education, and therefore facilitate communication between the union, its members, and management, just by the virtue of a stable membership.

The graduate employee union differs from the traditional labor union in two essential ways. Its membership consists, by definition, of people whose purpose is to be employed elsewhere. Consequently, members are in the union, generally, for no more than 5-7 years, though there are exceptions. This means that 25% to as much as 50% of the membership has to be signed every year; whereas the traditional union has no such task to face on a yearly basis. This is an important task requiring a significant amount of work, but this work of signing members is the bare minimum required of a functioning union. This turnover means that 25%-50% of the graduate employee union has to be educated about their rights as workers and as defined by the contract every year; that 25%-50% has to learn where to find union representation, to find information about the contract every year. This is a massive undertaking each year that impacts the graduate union not only in terms of a volume of work that traditional unions just don't have to face, but also in terms of how it works on a daily basis.

This turnover, even more significantly, affects graduate union leadership. The traditional union can generally count on the stability and longevity, in terms of employment and union membership, of its leadership. In the traditional union there can be an apprenticeship to the union work itself, in which the active member is trained over a period of time to recognize, file and negotiate grievances, for instance. The graduate union representative's apprenticeship into such a position is dramatically abbreviated. This does not mean that the graduate representative is a poor leader or representative, but that the apprenticeship is much more intensive and the union must always emphasize the continuous education of as many of its members as possible, because leadership, by definition, is transient--and overworked.

The graduate union must institutionally address the issue of a transient and overworked leadership in order to accommodate labor laws that depend heavily on institutional memory and past practice. It must also find a way to institutionalize itself in order to accommodate the educational needs of its leadership, to aid them in balancing activism, coursework, teaching, research, and, finally, the dissertation. Graduate union leaders should not be required to be martyrs to the cause--there really are just so many hours in each day and no one should be required to sacrifice original goals in order to keep a union functioning. The union can't structurally and institutionally rely on the stability of leaders for its operation, because it does not and

cannot have a stable leadership. Instead, the graduate union must build and institutionalize a strong foundational structure.

In addition to the obstacles inherent to the graduate union, there are obstacles determined by outside forces that exacerbate these inherent obstacles and introduce new problems altogether. How a union is recognized by PERB or NLRB determines how a union operates. A graduate union can be recognized on a single campus (such as in the University of Wisconsin at Madison); or in a state-wide system (such as in the cases of the state university system in New York or the recently recognized University of California system); or as part of the faculty union (such as at Rutgers and the City University of New York system). Unions that encompass both faculty and graduates can present issues about conflicts of interest: faculty are often our supervisors, faculty fit much better into the traditional union paradigm and their longevity will lend authority to their union activism leading to lower participation of graduate students than might otherwise be expected. The case of Rutgers here is instructive: they have had very little graduate participation in the union and they currently have no graduate students at all sitting on the executive board. The case of the system-wide union can also pose some very real logistical problems: traveling from Buffalo to Albany for a meeting, 600 miles round trip, can certainly be prohibitive for someone teaching and taking three courses. Enough weekends spent in traveling to meetings can accelerate time to burnout for union activists, as well as make incompletes and other deferred work much more probable, which can certainly detract from the quality of union work as well as that of course work and teaching. Collaboration between campus leadership is essential for a fully functioning union, but mundane logistical problems can prevent such collaboration-and university management certainly uses this to their benefit.

Our larger affiliations can also determine our institutional structure. Communication Workers of America (CWA), for instance, imposes a three-year term for its officers, a requirement that assumes a stable membership of full time employees for extended periods. Who we are--temporary employees from 1-7 years who may not be in the bargaining unit even for consecutive semesters--dictates that a three-year term simply will not work for us. In addition to all of this, state laws affect collective bargaining; what may be a challenge for the traditional union can be devastating for a graduate union of transient members. There are currently graduate union movements in "Right to Work" states (Arizona, Kansas); states with laws against collective bargaining (North Carolina); states with laws against collective bargaining for university employees (Texas, Tennessee, Arizona, Maryland, etc.); states with laws against collective bargaining for graduate students (Ohio).

The obstacles both inherent to and imposed by outside forces must be addressed by the graduate union in its bylaws and in its constitution. The new union, as a legitimate, legally recognized representative institution, must have bylaws in order to officially--and legally--assume its new role, and it is never too soon to begin to consider how that union should function. A properly functioning union should not operate from crisis to crisis--crises are predictably consistent--but lay the groundwork for a graduate union that will be a reliable, daily presence.

II. The Daily Work of a Recognized Union

The daily work of a graduate employee union can be broken down into two relatively distinct though mutually informing areas: absolutely necessary mobilization and absolutely necessary representation. Both representation and mobilization are requisites for a sustainable and effective union. The particularly transient membership of graduate unions sets the tone and mandate for both of these domains. While these issues are faced by all unions, the stakes are higher in graduate unions that must constantly renew themselves.

Mobilization is probably one of the skills most fully developed in union drives, so some of the points here

may seem relatively self-evident, but they bear some repetition because of their critical importance to graduate unions. While the exact forms of mobilizing will necessarily vary depending upon the strengths and limitations of each local situation, the activity will center on two-way communication between the union and its members. At the most basic level, new (and many continuing) members need to know that they have a union in the first place. Further, since many members will not have a union background, they will need to have some sense of what the union does. A general dissemination of basic rights according to law and to the contract helps ensure at least a minimum of protection across multiple and diverse graduate work areas. Most graduate employees will be more interested in beginning their graduate career than learning the intricacies of their union, but they should know where to find answers to their questions when they arise. Once problems do arise, it should be clear who to contact within the union. Communication in the union framework can become an important hinge in the transition from rank and file to active members if, in the process, the union works to empower its membership by letting them know how they can contribute to the solution of their particular problem, to the more general improvement of their working conditions, and finally to the strength of their representation.

At the same time that the members need to know about the union, the union needs to know about its members if it is to represent and protect them. Information about historical and present workplace conditions is critical to establishing and enforcing a contract. Further, the issues that members in various situations find both good and problematic about their workplaces and benefits become the basis for future negotiations. Without bottom-up communication, a union can become a prescriptive rather than a representative institution. The large differences even on one campus between and within the humanities and sciences can make this a daunting task. For multi-campus, statewide unions, the complexity and distance make communication all the more difficult yet all the more necessary. There are many different institutional forms that this mobilization can take, but some of the most common include the development of leadership positions such as stewards, mobilizers, chief stewards, and vice presidents of membership. Dedicating, and thereby institutionalizing, a position within the union leadership to the signing and education of membership will make the importance of this clear and will ensure that someone is committed to outreach to members. A union derives its strength from its members--the more signed and informed members a union has, the stronger it is--which cannot be emphasized enough.

The University of Wisconsin at Madison TAA has developed some particularly productive means of addressing this particular issue. First, they have divided the position of Secretary into two positions, the Recording Secretary and the Membership Secretary. This avoids the conflation of mobilization and office structure while recognizing the critical importance of both of these areas. Second, they have created Area Representatives who, working with the Membership Secretary and Co-presidents, organize and maintain contact with departmental Stewards in their particular areas, defined in their bylaws as "humanities, social sciences, natural science, applied science, education and professional school areas." One of the strengths of the Area Representative structure is its acknowledgement of the difference in graduate work areas. From this starting point, the TAA bylaws attempt to empower each of those individual areas instead of necessarily applying a particular, centralized model upon them. Rather than relying upon the particular dynamics of different departments and work areas to produce stewards, it puts forward an officer to assure that an area has representation while encouraging each department to appoint and maintain a steward. The area representative structure works to address the possible lack of representation from various areas and preemptively staves off the possible degeneration of representation in some areas. System-wide unions clearly must have area representation, and the challenge will be how to coordinate that representation so that members at each campus will have an equal voice within the union and so that all of the union leadership will be informed about the negotiations of the union with the system administration. This, of course, is very clear during contract negotiations, but working out how the contract is enforced on each campus will become important for the next contract as well as finding ways to leverage for limited negotiations between contracts.

Combined faculty and graduate unions, such as the Rutgers AAUP and CUNY Professional Staff Congress, do offer some benefits, but they also pose particular problems to actively mobilizing and empowering graduate student employee members. Some of the best intentions by faculty unions can still reduce graduate involvement to a paternal extension of the mentor relation where the faculty know what is really best for graduate students and then attempt to secure it in the domain of the workplace. This paternalistic invisibility can be limited by accommodating for this possibility in the union structure by allowing for shorter leadership terms for graduate student representatives, institutionalizing an active and continuous recruitment of graduate student membership, and perhaps dedicating a position for the continual mobilization and education of graduate student membership within the union.

While mobilization is necessary to maintain a union, it cannot be the union's only goal. As a legal representative institution, it represents its members to the university administration through bargaining a contract, pursuing grievances, and often by carrying out regular labor/management meetings. This is the bread and butter of the union. Local situations will also make more or less important the union's role representing its members to its national affiliate or to outside elements of the community, legislature, or judiciary. Some unions have had to lobby their state legislature for recognition, for example. The importance of enforcing and monitoring a contract cannot be overemphasized. Contracts are broken all the time and the contract may not function in practice as the bargaining team anticipated. Knowing how part of the contract works *in practice* can help the bargaining team in the next round of negotiations (there are always more negotiations) to make the contract work better for members. Knowing, for instance, that the child care center on campus has a prohibitively long waiting list will make funds for child care off campus more necessary for members. Even more important, if the grievance procedure seems to work much better for management than it does for member grievants, the bargaining team will need to know the specifics of each case as well as which parts of the grievance procedure will need to be addressed at the bargaining table. This representation does not simply grow out of mobilization but rests upon organization and leadership.

The graduate union's transient membership makes it all the more critical to establish an organization that facilitates the leadership of the union. Since the individual performing a particular function in a graduate union will, realistically and even ideally, change almost every year, the skills and institutional memory necessary to effectively represent the membership need to become more elements of office management than individual expertise. It is at this point that we arrive at the epic importance of the mundane--after all, little could seem more mundane than establishing a very good filing system, yet little could be more important to the long-term strength of a union. A filing system becomes the critical institutional memory of a union through its documentation of past practice, a component of any grievance or negotiation. Further, the definition of officer duties in officer manuals both serves to keep important activities from slipping through the cracks and preserves some of the current officers' hard won insight for those future generations of union activists and leaders. These manuals, along with templates for all manners of documents (grievance letters, appeals, newsletters, minutes) can ease the steep learning curve while insuring that no member's job security is sacrificed as a training exercise. Furthermore, the grievance process nearly always works on strict deadlines for both the union and for university administration. One missed deadline can effectively kill a grievance, and clear files and a calendar of deadlines can make the difference between a successful grievance and a failure.

An active union will have many meetings with administration and membership, so some means of organizing dates can be an important element of a union office. In 1998, the Wayne State GEOC interestingly combined its meeting calendar with mobilization by scheduling regular meetings that were made public through a calendar on their web site. In order to meet the deadlines and daily work of the union, contact lists of volunteers, officers, committees should be maintained and frequently used. These people are resources to meet a crisis, but more importantly their consistent involvement keeps work from falling on a couple of people. The critical process of delegation involves many people in the union and

allows a broad-based, low-stakes participation. Responsible delegation both strengthens the current leadership and develops the next leaders. Two last points of office management/leadership that merit brief mention are finances and note-taking (bargaining notes, notes of all interactions between the union and management, etc.). Most graduate employee union officers are not trained accountants, so even the best meaning officers can wreak havoc in a dues-collecting union that can undermine even the best mobilization and organization. Transparency, training, and institutionalized checks are a must so that the IRS does not come to repossess the car of the current treasurer for unpaid payroll taxes from previous years--as has actually happened to one graduate union. Finally, a successful office structure will keep notes from meetings, negotiations, grievances, etc. easily accessible.

Clearly, the best graduate employee union structure in the world is no use without people, which makes mobilization and the organizational mundanities necessary compliments. Still, the organization and office structure of the union should be so clear that if a neutron bomb hits the union's leadership, a new graduate employee could walk in the next year and quickly learn how to get the union rolling again or at least know where the union should be rolling. The neutron bomb scenario is unfortunately not too far-fetched, nor is it too far from the condition of some of the graduate unions that we contacted. After a successful drive for recognition or a contract, a union should assume that active members will return to postponed dissertations, relationships, and families. Counting on individuals to sacrifice their academic careers is a recipe for decay, burnout, or martyrdom. In any of these cases, only a very small, sometimes nonexistent, percentage of a graduate union's membership could meet the institutional demand, a situation that is hardly democratic or representative.

Already existing graduate employee unions have established a range of different officer structures to meet the demands of maintaining a union. The key practical principal that we would like to highlight in this diversity is the need to break all tasks down to the point where one person can actually perform the duties entailed, even within the framework of the multiple professional, academic, and personal demands that graduate employees face. The current graduate employee unions have each experimented with different combinations of paid and unpaid officers, variations of paid and unpaid office staffs, and distributions of responsibility. The biggest problem facing these unions is transient leadership, so paid staff can offer some much needed continuity. At the same time, it is critical that the actual membership and actual members run the union. Some unions have had problems balancing the power of long-term staff against the relative inexperience of union leadership. The University of Wisconsin at Madison TAA has attempted to counter this by limiting their staff's length of employment to two years. Another possible division that we find appealing is to make paid staff (if the union is lucky enough to afford paid staff) particularly responsible for the office work and support that is critical to a graduate union while leaving such activities as negotiating, mobilizing, and grievances to the elected officers and active members. Regardless of what structure a union puts into place, a large number of members should continually be involved in running the union.

Finally, we would like to end by highlighting the importance of communication. It is communication that makes every single point of mobilizing and organizing possible. A union simply ceases to function without communication. The union must constantly remind its members that it exists, that the membership has rights, and what those rights are. In order to enforce the contract, the union will need to make it available to the membership in some accessible and digestible form, whether it be on the union website in summary and in its entirety; the union could send out copies to new members of the bargaining unit or could even negotiate for the university to do so. A regular office and regular office hours are ways to reinforce the union's presence and provide a means for members to connect with union leadership. The union could have a regular page in one or more of the student newspapers in addition to its own regularly published newsletter. An e-mail listserv, for example, can greatly facilitate the distribution of information. In the matter of just a few minutes, you can update hundreds of members about the progress of negotiations, of upcoming meetings, of university decisions that directly effect graduate employment.

Informed members are empowered members--and this is why we formed unions in the first place. The union needs to know about its members so it can represent them and members need to know about the unions and their rights so they can represent themselves. Communication between a union and its members is its lifeblood.

The graduate employee union must be a constantly mobilizing union. Rather than consider this its greatest obstacle, we should consider it one of our greatest strengths. Transiency means that we can almost never have an entrenched leadership cut off from the membership. We will always have new infusions of creativity and energy in the ongoing experiment of the graduate employee union.

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