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THE TEACHERS FOR A DEMOCRATIC CULTURE/*WORKPLACE*

Awards to Graduate Employees

Vicky Smallman

Introduction: Presenting the Nominees

We at *Workplace* know it's not easy being a graduate student activist. It takes tremendous dedication and sacrifice to fight for justice in the academic workplace and beyond while keeping up with your academic work, not to mention trying to juggle a personal life or family responsibilities. We'd like to offer a new conception of "Service to the Profession," that oft-underrated third aspect of the academic career—one that recognizes the value of active participation in academic labor struggles. We believe that activism should not just be encouraged, it should be rewarded. So in partnership with Teachers for a Democratic Culture, we are co-sponsoring an annual "Service to the Profession Award" to support graduate student activism.

There were 12 nominations for the inaugural award, including a collective nomination for the entire Graduate Student Employee Action Coalition (GSEAC/UAW) at the University of Washington. The award committee, which included Cary Nelson, Marc Bousquet, Richard Ohmann, Steve Parks, Ray Watkins, and myself, had a difficult decision to make. Clearly, all of the nominees display tremendous dedication to the profession, to their peers, and to the graduate student labor movement. Each of them deserves to be recognized and applauded. So in addition to choosing a winner, we also awarded two honorable mentions. And we decided to profile everyone in *Workplace*, in the hopes that these activists' stories affirm, inspire, and provoke other graduate students to take action to end exploitation in the academic workplace. (Regrettably, not all award nominees were able to accommodate *Workplace's* request for profiles.)

This year's award winner is James Thompson, a graduate student in History at the University of Florida and a leading activist in Graduate Assistants United (GAU). The growth of the GAU is no small achievement for Thompson and his colleagues in Gainesville—membership has expanded by over 200%, with substantial increases in traditionally underrepresented disciplines. There is a vibrant stewards' network--the cornerstone of any successful union. Thompson has also been supportive of other campus movements, helping undergraduate students launch an anti-sweatshop campaign and building campus-wide support for custodial workers. Finally, he is deeply involved in a variety of community activities, including the Civic Media Center, a local alternative forum and library that serves the UF community, and the Gainesville Living Wage Coalition. His tireless commitment to social and economic justice, combined with his outstanding scholarship and commitment to teaching, make him a fitting recipient of the 2000 TDC/*Workplace* Service to the Profession award.

The strength of the applicants led the panel to select two additional students, Kitty Krupat and Ken Lang, for honorable mentions. A graduate student in the American Studies Program at New York University, Krupat has been a leading figure in the GSOC organizing drive. She spent many years in labor organizing, including work at the UAW and UNITE, and has published and organized several conferences on the gay and lesbian movement and the labor movement. Lang is a graduate student in History at the University of Washington and a key leader in the mobilization of graduate employees at UW in their struggle for voluntary recognition. The Graduate Student Employee Action Coalition (GSEAC/UAW) signed up an astonishing 84% of the potential bargaining unit in their recent campaign. As Assistant Director for the Center for Labor Studies, Lang helped create the climate of labor-related activism that has been important to all sorts of recent developments in the area, including the big turnouts around the WTO demonstrations.

Teachers for a Democratic Culture and *Workplace* established this award in order to recognize the transformative role that the graduate student labor movement is having on our profession. These nominees have tremendous energy, dedication, and a strong sense of the connections between academic workplace issues and broader struggles. Their strength will only become more necessary as our campuses grapple with the growing influence of corporatization and globalization. We hope their stories will inspire others to take action on their campus and in their community.

Why an award? Because the sad reality is that doing the right thing does not always feel as rewarding as it should—especially for graduate student activists, who are constantly pressured to put aside their extracurricular activities for more serious and career-building endeavors, such as, say, publishing. Or keeping your mouth shut. I'm not sure how many times faculty in my graduate program counseled me to give up my union work, or risk compromising my future as an academic (as it turned out, my future lay in organizing, not academia, but that's another story altogether). As James Thompson points out in his interview with Katherine Wills, "the single question they ask you constantly is not 'How goes the union?' The question is 'How goes your dissertation' or 'How goes your career?'" That's the only real concern many of them have." Activists face a constant internal struggle between their reflex to fight for justice and their desire to pursue their careers. It helps all of us to know we're not alone in facing these challenges.

Unions work best when members are engaged and empowered; many of these profiles illustrate the importance of the organizing model of unionism to the academic workplace. Whether shop stewards like Jennifer Ryan and Dave Kamper, whose "commitment to building union membership across disciplinary divides bespeaks a crucial democratizing vision of the campus community," or negotiators like Philip Zwerling and Sarah Hardgrave, individual activists' efforts cannot be separated from the thousands of graduate students who sign union cards, show up at meetings and demonstrations, distribute materials, write proposals, file grievances, and generally make their voices heard.

The story of Sarah Hardgrave's battle to win improvements to the insurance package for union members at the University of Oregon is a powerful illustration of the importance of a mobilized grassroots to success at the bargaining table. John Fiskio-Lasseter's profile reinforces this point: "Only through the growth of interest and participation in the goals and direction of the GTFF can the union be strong and represent the interests of the people within the bargaining unit." To make this work, negotiators like Sarah and stewards like John have to "live the organizing model every day."

Oddly, graduate student activism can be both isolating and socially stimulating. While your work may go unrecognized by your departmental colleagues, and even be actively discouraged by supervisors and mentors, activism can generate new connections and friendships that are hard to imagine in the increasingly insular world of academe. Many of our nominees do not confine their activism to graduate student issues—they are involved in independent media, anti-sweatshop campaigns, local labor councils, NOW, and a wide range of movements and campaigns. According to James Thompson, this kind of "crossover activism," the understanding that "we don't have any business sticking to ourselves and

fighting just for ourselves," can have unexpected personal benefits. He describes a vibrant activist culture in Gainesville, a source of energy that comes from supporting each others' campaigns.

Coalition-building is essential crucial for any union—graduate employee unions benefit from working cooperatively with other campus groups, as well as with labor and social movement groups in the broader community. For example, media attention and public pressure played an important role in the University of Oregon's decision to meet the GTFF's demands for a fair insurance package. As Larin McLaughlin of the GSEAC/UAW writes, her union "saw more and more evidence of the relationships between our situation and other connected struggles in Seattle, Washington State and the national labor movement," from the strike mobilization of newspaper workers in Seattle to the campaigns of migrant workers in Washington's agricultural industry. "In the process of organizing academic student employees," McLaughlin points out, "activists on this campus and others develop and use models for organizing the temporary and contingent workforce that can strengthen the labor movement, especially in areas of employment that haven't traditionally been unionized."

These profiles tell stories of courage, sacrifice, solidarity, and victory. They illustrate profiler Mark Quigley's claim that the graduate student unionization movement "serves as an important site of resistance and a not inconsiderable source of hope."

Profiles were not available for the following nominees:

Denise Goens, Ontario Veterinary College, University of Guelph, Ontario

Erika Gubrium, University of Florida

Kitty Krupat, New York University (Honorable Mention winner)

Ken Lang, University of Washington (Honorable Mention winner)

Vicky Smallman, Canadian Association of University Teachers