



Graas, M. and Prew, P. (2001). Living the organizing model. *Workplace*, 7, 152-154.

LIVING THE ORGANIZING MODEL

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The Graduate Teaching Fellows Federation represents nearly 1,200 graduate teaching fellows employed at the University of Oregon in teaching, research, and administrative capacities. The GTFF's affiliates are the American Federation of Teachers-Oregon (AFT-Oregon), AFT, and AFL-CIO.

Full members comprise 60% of the bargaining unit, with the rest agency-fee payers. The highest decision-making body is the Executive Council, which consists of the elected department stewards plus the Executive Board officers. This entity sets policy and deals with overarching issues and concerns, while the nine board officers handle daily activities. Recently, the union has made a concerted and relatively successful effort to involve members in union business and to disseminate power from the board to the council: after several years of a staff-dominated union in which members had little control, in 1996 committed GTFF volunteers led a charge to make the union more member-driven and responsive. An upheaval in GTFF governance continues today as the council works steadily to expand membership participation through a transition to an organizing model of unionism and a renewed focus on issue-driven organizing.

Department stewards are fundamental to this process. John Fiskio-Lasseter, in particular, has been a stalwart member of the Executive Council. He has been a steward for over two years, and his dedication to and interest in the GTFF have visibly increased. John's gone from a "stopgap" steward to an earnest advocate of graduate employees in a very short period. Recently, John has taken active roles in both the Communications and the Rules Committees, while developing into a clear leader on the Executive Council: other stewards really look up to him and value his experience.

More importantly, John takes good care of his department. Computer and Information Science is a large worksite, employing 30-40 GTFs each term, and John has worked extensively to address GTF needs. He is adept at handling grievances and other workplace issues with tact and sensitivity; as a result of his diligence, membership in CIS has increased drastically over the past two years. John has proven to be a real advocate for the members he represents. For instance, many GTFs in CIS are international students, and last year some concerns arose about the relationship between immigration status and courseload/workload. John did an exceptional job of ferreting out the answers and enlightening the rest of the council. And when the university demanded that all GTFs enroll for and complete 16 credit hours each quarter, rather than the nine required by the collective bargaining agreement, John took and has continued to take a particularly prominent role, facing down his department chair and rallying the Executive Council. In all, John Fiskio-Lasseter lives the organizing model every day.

John's efforts, and those of others, have definitely led to a sea change in the way the union conducts its business. But problems continued to exist. Although steadily improving, limited member participation adversely affected collective bargaining in summer 1999: insurance premiums increased dramatically, and few GTFs were on campus to pressure the university--and those who were around were not made

sufficiently aware of the precarious situation of the GTFF insurance plan. When GTFs returned to campus in the fall, many became interested in union affairs for the first time as a result of these difficult negotiations. Therefore, the GTFF mobilization campaign sped up during fall 1999, when the non-compensation portions of the collective bargaining agreement opened. The GTFF made significant gains in bargaining, but then the bomb dropped.

During bargaining, the UO suddenly refused to provide employment information about GTFs, citing the Family Educational Records and Privacy Act (FERPA) of 1974, which ostensibly prohibited the release of such information. This caused, and continues to cause, mass confusion. The UO now requires all GTFs to sign a document allowing or refusing the UO to release employment data to the union. This is problematic for two reasons. First, under Oregon law public-sector unions must receive all employment information for each person represented, and no employee can remain "anonymous." Otherwise, the union automatically violates its mandated responsibility to represent all employees. Second, the GTFF administers the health insurance plan for all GTFs. Access to the insurance plan, with 100% employer-paid premiums, is a right of employment, not of union membership. But GTFs unknown to the union have been unable to take advantage of this significant benefit.

The GTFF has a clause in its contract specifying what information the university is to provide to the union at what times. Accordingly, when the GTFF brought an unfair labor practice against the university over this matter, the Employment Relations Board found for the union. The judge noted that there had been no instances in which the UO had been criticized by a GTF for releasing his or her employment information, nor had there ever been any episode whereby the system for providing information had broken down, save by the university's unilateral violation of the collective bargaining agreement. She then ordered the university to provide all employment information for all GTFs to the union immediately. The ruling is currently under appeal.

The union moved into another round of insurance negotiations during summer 2000—this time, without a collective bargaining agreement in place and without knowing who it represented. Facing a dangerously high insurance premium increase of 60%, the GTFF began a multifaceted campaign to protect its insurance plan. By this point, the GTFF had dramatically expanded its ability to call upon university groups, local unions, and political leaders for support during bargaining. Even more importantly, the conscious movement towards an organizing model of unionism was beginning to pay real dividends. Under John's tenure as steward, CIS has proved to be something of a bellwether: whatever the CIS GTFs start doing will eventually spread to other departments. John is so enthusiastic about his department and what is happening in it that stewards from other worksites have adopted his techniques. And since during the 1999-2000 academic year CIS graduate employees were signing membership cards and participating in union activities like never before; this newfound spirit spread into other departments, with hugely positive gains.

Faculty, classified employees, undergraduates and especially graduate employees wrote letters of support to the administration. GTFs swamped campus administrators' fax machines, voicemail, and email accounts with fervent messages. Press releases and the resulting stories brought attention to the campus at a time when administrators desperately wanted anonymity. (When the UO joined the Workers' Rights Consortium in April of 2000, UO alumnus and nonpareil donor Phil Knight, CEO and founder of Nike, withdrew a pledge of \$30 million he had privately given toward the expansion of the football stadium. All hell broke loose.)

On the last day of negotiations, the GTFF staged a symbolic protest, with hordes of GTFs erecting tents on the lawn of the administration building. The protest brought camera crews to campus and to the final bargaining session, which promptly caused the UO's bargaining team to accede to the union's demands. The interest and involvement of GTFs through issue-based organizing, the support of community groups, and the effective use of opportunities to pressure the university all combined for a surprisingly favorable

outcome during the summer 2000 negotiations.

Ultimately, these problems that the university has created (including far more than can be cited here) have resulted in a huge success for the union: member interest and participation has increased dramatically. The GTFF counts over 100 active volunteers, there are stewards in more departments each term, and the Executive Board is full for the first time since 1997.

The overall goal of the GTFF is to increase member participation from all graduate employees. 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. In this light, John's contributions can be best understood. His contributions to his and other departments, his persistence in organizing and recruiting, and his deep and abiding commitment to graduate employee unionism are inspiring. The GTFF is truly lucky to have him.

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