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ORGANIZING OVER THE LONG HAUL:

The SAGE/UAW Campaign at the University of California

Mark Quigley

For decades, the University of California claimed that its 9000 academic student employees (ASEs) were not really workers. Even though their labor was critical to the University's teaching mission—UC graduate student instructors provided 60% of undergraduate "teaching contact" and tutors served an essential role in undergraduate education—the University denied ASEs collective bargaining rights and contractually—guaranteed wages, benefits, and workloads. The arguments the university advanced to support its outrageous refusal to respect basic democratic rights were anti-union classics: the workers do not "deserve" a union and are ultimately acting against their own best interests in pursuing one. According to this position, ASEs were "apprentices" with no collective bargaining rights under the law. The university essentially claimed that the university was doing ASEs a favor by allowing them to work because the ASEs gained more from the experience of working than the university benefited from their labor. The university never bothered to explain just how it would function without ASE labor. Did they expect faculty to simply absorb the work? Would scantron machines replace critical reading and meaningful feedback? Adding insult to injury, university spokespeople asserted that the ASEs really did not need a union but should instead rely on collegiality and the beneficent wisdom of the university to solve all of their workplace concerns. One dean famously dismissed ASE collective bargaining by asking, "Do parents negotiate with their children over pocket money?"

Under the aegis of the United Auto Workers (UAW), University of California ASEs embarked on a seventeen-year, eight-campus coalition campaign to win collective bargaining and a contract. The campaign involved a multi-faceted strategy of on-campus organizing, intercampus coalition building, demonstrations and job actions, legislative delegations and letter-writing, outreach to UC undergraduates, faculty, and alumni, solidarity activities with other California unions, and legal efforts in California's labor courts.

The campaign reached a crescendo with a simultaneous UC systemwide strike in December 1998. Some labor scholars labeled it the largest job action of its kind in the history of the academic workplace. That same month, the California Public Employment Relations Board issued a ruling rejecting the UC's contention of apprenticeship, affirming the collective bargaining rights of ASEs, and ordering union representation elections at the UC campuses. Still, the university remained defiant, even suggesting at one point that a provision of the California Constitution made the university exempt from California law. Ultimately, however, pressure from the state legislature and various internal UC constituencies led the university to reconsider its position and adopt a more cooperative approach.

During the Spring of 1999, ASEs at all eight UC campuses with undergraduate populations elected to be represented by UAW-affiliated unions. These victories came despite strong management counter-

organizing.

In May 2000, UAW-affiliated unions representing 9400 teaching assistants, readers, and tutors at eight UC campuses successfully negotiated a contract which won wage increases, provided for full tuition waivers, and set maximum workload limits. The contract also was notable for its protections against sexual harassment and the inclusion of binding arbitration as a last-stage enforcement mechanism. The contract ratification marked the realization of the systemwide campaign and a turning point in the nationwide campus unionization movement. The UC's costly, prolonged, and ultimately unsuccessful anti-union campaign will hopefully serve as a cautionary example to administrators at other universities where ASEs are organizing.

Over the years and across the state, thousands of union activists contributed to the success of the UAW-UC system campaign. During the height of the campaign at UCLA, anthropology graduate student David Kamper served as campus organizer for the Student Association of Graduate Employees (SAGE/UAW). His employment and volunteer commitments to the union often meant 40+ hour organizing weeks. Simultaneously, he maintained other part-time jobs (including teaching assistantships) and completed graduate coursework in American Indian Studies and Anthropology. David has, in fact, combined his intellectual interests and his experience as a union organizer. He is currently writing a dissertation analyzing union organizing on Indian reservations.

David mastered the hallmark face-to-face, one-on-one organizing style of the UAW-UC campaign. Canvassing UCLA's large campus on foot, he went door-to-door, through labyrinthine corridors of labs and cubicles, seeking out individual ASEs within SAGE/UAW's 1700-member bargaining unit. David played a key role in organizing for the systemwide strike in 1998, the 1999 PERB representation election and the 2000 contract ratification vote. Through it all, his enthusiasm never seemed to dim nor his energy flag. Driven by both an intense dedication to the cause and a metabolism permanently stuck on "high," David was virtually unstoppable as an organizer. A big part of his effectiveness also lay in his willingness to really engage with the workers he was organizing and use their feedback to shape the ongoing organizing strategy. David was particularly effective in expanding union membership in the natural sciences, thereby solidifying the union's campus-wide base. David also displayed real talent at the difficult task of developing leadership in the union. He was thus able to multiply the effect of his own efforts and put the union on a solid base for the future. David's commitment to building union membership across disciplinary divides bespeaks a crucial democratizing vision of the campus community, one which recognizes that universities work best when university workers are democratically enfranchised.

Today, the union is building from this strong foundation as it works to get new workers involved with the union and make sure the contract is fairly and consistently implemented. Educating workers is a crucial element of this process as the union is strongest when its members know their rights and are empowered to assert them.

After a very long struggle, ASEs have compelled the University of California to acknowledge their work and the fundamental role they play in fulfilling the university's teaching mission. This victory is not only an important step forward in terms of labor policy but it also makes university education more affordable and accessible to working class students. Many other universities, however, continue to trample on the rights of their workers, justifying their actions with the same tired paternalism formerly espoused by the UC. Organizing campaigns thus need the active support of all progressive constituencies within the academy. And where there are not yet organizing drives, ASEs need to start them. While the success of the ASE unionization movement is obviously of particular importance for ASEs themselves, it needs to be viewed within the broader institutional context of the academy. ASEs comprise a crucial unit of the labor structure of the contemporary American university. In addition, they serve as a nexus for students, faculty, and staff and are likely to be members of each of those constituencies at various points in their careers. Organizing and empowering ASEs thus serves the interests of all of these constituencies in a very direct

way. As universities embrace corporate organizational models all the more tightly, the ASE unionization movement serves as a important site of resistance and a not inconsiderable source of hope.

Mark Quigley, University of California, Los Angeles