



Cornell, A. (2007). Armbands, Arguments, Op-Eds, and Banner-Drops: Undergraduate Participation in a Graduate Employee Strike. *Workplace*, 14.

**Armbands, Arguments, Op-Eds, and Banner-Drops: Undergraduate Participation in a Graduate Employee Strike**

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The picket line on the first day of the 2005-2006 graduate student employee strike at New York University was massive, loud, confident and jubilant. Immediately adjacent to an information table the union had erected for strikers, members of the student group Grad/Undergrad Solidarity (GUS) staffed a heavily-trafficked strike center for undergraduates that offered a petition and email sign-up sheet, literature and picket signs geared specifically to students, and piles of free pins, stickers, and screen-printed armbands to wear. By noon the picket line had swelled to nearly a thousand participants, and strike captains decided to lead the assembled crowd out of the wooden barricades erected by police for a march around Washington Square—the historic Greenwich Village park that the NYU campus has grown to engulf. As the march passed the NYU student center, two members of GUS unfurled a massive banner bearing the demand “Contract Now!” from a second floor balcony. As cheers rose from the marchers below, security officers seized the students and the banner. When, moments later, strikers spotted the student activists inside the building’s first floor windows, apparently being detained by the guards, members of the crowd crossed the street and began pounding on the building’s glass façade, chanting, “Let them go!” Some union leaders, fearing the situation might spin out of control, quickly moved to calm the crowd. The confrontation and eventual release (with no repercussions) of the undergraduate supporters provided an emotional flashpoint during the first week of the strike. Their contributions on Day One made it clear that undergraduate activists would play multiple—sometimes audacious—roles in the unfolding job action. Their attempts to educate and organize fellow students, on the one hand, and to use their bodies to increase pressure on the administration and inspire strikers, on the other, indicate two related aspects of undergraduate involvement that I examine at length below. Furthermore, the differing reactions on November 9<sup>th</sup> to the undergrad banner drop and its repercussions—the impulses to “heat up” or “cool down” the strike—held in microcosm tensions and strategic differences that would play out repeatedly over the next six months.

The active participation of undergraduates in the NYU strike should come as no surprise to those familiar with student activism in recent years. As universities have become important sites of labor struggles over the last two decades, students have

assumed significant, highly-visible roles. The late-1990s saw the emergence of United Students Against Sweatshops, an organization linking undergraduate activists at over 200 schools, which has carried out successful campaigns to improve conditions in the collegiate apparel industry (Featherstone, 2002; Ross, 2004). Students have since taken up campaigns to expel Coca-Cola from various campuses in response to the company's abysmal labor and environmental record, and have launched the Student-Farm worker Alliance which targets fast-food franchises in solidarity with immigrant vegetable growers (Blanding, 2006; Berkowitz, 2005). In these efforts, activists support workers who are not directly employed by the universities, but rather by industries that universities hire to provide products and services. Universities are seen as strategic sites to push for industry standards and accountability by these multi-school, nationally coordinated campaigns due to the size of the universities' institutional contracts and their susceptibility to student and community pressure urging renegotiations of their commercial relationships.

Students have also played decisive roles in campaigns to force their educational institutions to negotiate union contracts or pay "living wages" to clerical, custodial, food service, and other campus workers employed by the schools themselves. At some colleges and universities, such efforts have extended to support for graduate student instructors, adjuncts, and permanent faculty members attempting to unionize or improve the conditions under which they perform academic labor. Student efforts in support of university workers date back to the earliest campus-organizing drives, but have garnered increased attention since activists at top schools like Georgetown and Harvard have scored significant victories after turning to confrontational tactics such as hunger strikes and building occupations (Williams, 2003; Krupat and Tanenbaum, 2002).

While contemporary campaigns in support of campus employees are often comprised of the same, or many of the same, students that engage in anti-sweatshop struggles, they depend on somewhat distinct contributions from undergraduates and require a different type of relationship between students and workers. In campaigns supporting low-wage production workers who live in other states and countries, student organizations play the leading roles on campus. They typically have autonomy to determine the details of their local campaigns assuming they remain within general guidelines established in concert with the workers whose interests they claim to represent. In campus-employee union drives, on the other hand, students are in closer and more continual contact with the aggrieved workers and their unions. They collaborate with student activists at other universities less frequently due to the local nature of the campaigns. In such efforts, workers play the leading role on campus and, through their unions, determine campaign strategies, which sometimes include requests for or appreciative acceptance of certain forms of support from undergraduates. Though the forms of solidarity differ, in both modes of struggle universities have proven vulnerable to leverage brought to bear by progressive students who have joined the fray of labor disputes whose outcomes may have real impacts on their lives, but which do not directly affect the students' own conditions of employment. Among other factors, the combination of consumer power, race and class privilege, willingness and ability to take risks, free time, and inter-collegiate networks that students wield has repeatedly tipped the balance of power away from university administrators or business owners and in favor of struggling workers (Featherstone, 2002; Krupat and Tanenbaum, 2002).

Recognition of such successes, it is important to say, does not mean that students have or will only play supportive roles in labor conflicts on campus—in many cases they have proven apathetic or openly hostile to organizing efforts (Newman, 1997).

Recently, scholars concerned with changes in the ways universities operate have attempted to create a framework for understanding both academic laborer organizing drives and student campaigns in support of low-paid off-campus (and often off-shore) workers as part of a larger matrix of struggles against neoliberal logics and initiatives taking place on “the contested campuses” of advanced industrial countries. Theorists such as Nick Dyer-Witheford, Tiziana Terranova, and Marc Bousquet argue that the research and training functions of universities have taken on increased importance to accumulation and reproduction in the era of high-tech, “cognitive” capitalism, but that conditions appear to be ripening for the campus to once again become an important site of struggle, this time over the various impacts of “marketisation” (Dyer-Witheford, 2004; Terranova and Bousquet, 2004). Concomitant with the consolidation of this high-tech and globalized form of capital, of course, has been the precipitous decline of the mainstream labor movement in the face of capital’s withdrawal from the terms of its implicit postwar accord with labor (Moody, 1988; Lichtenstein, 2002). The ability of these emergent oppositional constituencies to collaborate in support of one another’s efforts, then, is likely to be a key factor in the success of any of their individual campaigns. Therefore, developing a more coherent praxis of student participation in academic labor struggles should be seen as a pressing and productive task. While student anti-sweatshop initiatives have been documented and analyzed fairly extensively, fewer attempts have been made to assess the impact of undergraduate participation in campaigns launched by campus workers.

In what follows, I examine as a case study the various responses of undergraduates at New York University to the six-month strike to retain union recognition waged by graduate student employees during the 2005-2006 school year. After pointing to ways in which both pro- and anti-union students impacted the job action, I delineate the specific successes and challenges faced by an undergraduate solidarity group in order to pass along organizing lessons. From this experience, I raise questions regarding the challenges of coalition work between unions and student activists, and outline a critique of the union’s strategy based on the undergraduate experience of the strike. I offer these comments as a member of the Organizing Committee of the NYU graduate student union whose first experience with organized labor came through involvement in the University of Michigan USAS chapter as an undergraduate. Owing to this background, I served as a liaison between undergraduate activists and the union before and during the strike.

### **Background of the Conflict**

In 2001, graduate student employees at New York University affiliated with a local of the United Auto Workers of America (UAW) to form the Graduate Student Organizing Committee (GSOC), the first union of teaching and research assistants to win recognition at a private university in the United States.<sup>1</sup> When GSOC’s first contract expired in August of 2005, NYU refused to negotiate a new agreement with the union, citing the July 2004 *Brown University* National Labor Relations Board ruling which withdrew the requirement for private universities to recognize graduate student assistants

as employees with legally guaranteed bargaining rights. GSOC pressured NYU to negotiate throughout the summer and early fall of 2005, organizing a massive Town Hall meeting, a rally, an act of civil disobedience, and a campaign urging invited guest speakers and performers to boycott NYU sponsored events until a settlement was reached. These tactics having proved insufficient, GSOC members struck their teaching, research, and administrative responsibilities on November 9, 2005.

Though GSOC was never able to mobilize its entire membership, a majority of the bargaining unit struck their work at the outset of the job action. In late November, NYU issued an ultimatum to strikers, threatening the suspension of teaching assignments and payment for two semesters to those that did not return to work. The threat prompted some strikers, especially international students concerned about losing their employment-based visas, to return to work. Reduced numbers of graduate employees continued to strike throughout the entirety of the spring semester, but GSOC became increasingly fractious as members raised serious criticisms of decision-making practices, strategy, and the union's ability to deal with social differences among members—notably, those of race, immigration-status, and sexuality—in a radical fashion. Union members voted to “recess” the strike as classes ended in May 2006. While divided over what tactics to use and what sacrifices were deemed acceptable to win, a majority of employees in the bargaining unit did, nonetheless, again affirm publicly their desire to belong to a union at the conclusion of the emotionally taxing six-month strike.

### **Preparations**

Though unable to reach its ultimate goal of recognition and a contract in the 2005-2006 school year, GSOC's considerable achievements should not be overlooked. High among these is the substantial level of undergraduate support the union was able to establish during the first semester of its strike. GSOC was unable to sustain this support as the strike rolled into the spring semester, however. NYU senior Sarah Dell'Orto recalls that “towards the beginning of the strike there was an incredible amount of undergrad support. As the year wore on, some undergrads got bored, while I think others were either alienated or simply annoyed with the strike.” Understanding why and how such broad undergraduate support swung rapidly towards apathy or hostility towards the union not only helps to illuminate the successes and limitations of the undergraduate component of the campaign, but also raises important questions about the union's overall strike strategy.

Undergraduate activists had made important contributions to the GSOC's 1997-2001 campaign to win recognition and a first contract by organizing fellow undergraduates to support the cause and encouraging hesitant TAs to throw their hats in with the union (Jessup, 2003; Eaton, 2002; Krupat and Tanenbaum, 2002). GSOC leaders and staff members, then, could and did draw on tactics they and their predecessors had deployed in collaboration with undergraduates five years earlier. Unfortunately, they could not tap the actual students who had participated in those previous campaigns. Even undergraduate activists entering their senior year in 2005 had cut their teeth on anti-war organizing in 2002 and 2003 and had little institutional memory of the array of progressive campus organizations that had contributed to the union's historic victories in 2000 and 2001. Since winning recognition, GSOC organizers and staff had utilized their contract's grievance procedure to advocate on

behalf of members facing problems related to their work. However, the union did not maintain a significant presence in broader campus life as an organization that initiated programming or worked to support other progressive efforts.<sup>2</sup> GSOC, therefore, had to start nearly from scratch in developing awareness, credibility, and political capital among undergraduates.

Regardless of these setbacks, as its first contract neared expiration, GSOC organizers sought to relate to undergraduates on two levels. First, member organizers worked to provide information to, and win the support (or at least neutralize the opposition) of the student body as a whole. Secondly, they sought to develop close working relationships with undergraduate social justice activists who were eager to participate in the campaign on a deeper level and who viewed the success of the fight as tied to their larger political goals. Burdened with the huge task of quickly organizing and mobilizing its own membership, GSOC looked to these undergraduate organizers to take on much (but not all) of the work necessary to build union solidarity among their classmates. GSOC took a similar approach to working with faculty.

Grad/Undergrad Solidarity was initiated in the spring of 2005 when GSOC members, including myself, contacted undergraduate student activists who had participated in other labor campaigns on campus. GSOC members knew whom to contact, and undergraduate leaders respected these requests to meet, due in part to the contributions GSOC organizers had previously made to the undergraduate-led campaigns. These collaborations, though often minor and short-lived, provided name recognition and a general sense that members of the union shared basic political commitments with the undergraduate groups. Initially GUS consisted of a half-dozen activists already engaged in a campaign against Coca-Cola company labor abuses who saw support of GSOC as intrinsically linked to their ongoing efforts to support worker rights and to expand student power at NYU. Students with little or no labor activist experience joined this core in September and October, after being recruited by their teaching assistants, professors, or members of GUS. The group ranged in size from ten to thirty active members over the course of the campaign, and included a few law students and graduate students who fell outside of GSOC's bargaining unit. Basing the group on an existing student club had considerable benefits—GUS had access to student activity funds which members had applied for the previous year, and it followed a loose set of operating and decision-making procedures developed in previous campaigns. Not surprisingly, however, the established friendships and working relationships between some members of the group also created challenges for integrating new members, which I return to below.

As GSOC organizers worked feverishly to establish support for a strike among its own membership in early autumn, union members also interacted with the undergraduate student body. Active teaching assistants discussed the conflict with their students in recitation sections, union spokespeople constantly communicated with campus media journalists, union activists distributed written materials through leaflets and emails, and GSOC helped organize teach-in style events. However, GUS members took responsibility for a number of key tasks in the period leading up to the strike. In the month prior to the launch of the strike, GUS members worked to educate the student body about the causes and stakes of the dispute, and to publicize ways to support the teaching assistants. They wrote editorials for the student newspaper and collaborated with GSOC and Faculty Democracy, a group of more than 200 pro-union professors, to

produce and distribute leaflets targeted at undergraduates. In mid-October GUS organized a well-attended event aimed at explaining why GSOC was preparing to strike, and situating the action in relation to the history of U.S. labor struggles and to the broader economic agenda of the Bush Administration.

GUS's most significant pre-strike contribution came in the form of class visits. GUS members developed a "rap" with GSOC organizers that concisely made the case for supporting the strike. After delivering this short presentation in classes taught by faculty supportive of the strike, GUS members answered questions, signed students up to a GSOC supporter email list, and distributed pro-union buttons and stickers. Students visited more than 60 classes, many of them large lectures, resulting in conversations with over a thousand students. Typically, presentations lasted fifteen minutes, but in a handful of classes they pre-empted the planned lecture for the entire class period.

In class visits and elsewhere, GUS members argued that having a graduate student union improved the quality of education undergraduates received. GSOC's first contract had mandated paid training for all first year teaching assistants, limited the workloads expected of assistants, and provided health care and a salary substantial enough for graduate students to be able to focus on their teaching and research without needing to work additional jobs. GUS revived a slogan from earlier campaigns that encapsulated the argument: "TA's working conditions are *our* learning conditions." Furthermore, GUS members argued, the graduate student union was an institution that helped to make the university a more democratic environment responsive to its various constituencies.<sup>3</sup> As GUS member Canek Peña-Vargas had it, "We kept alive an alternative to the message that the administration was pro-student in the process of being anti-union."

When meeting their colleagues to discuss the strike vote, GSOC organizers often found that teaching assistants' strongest reservations about striking arose from concerns that their students' education would suffer. Knowing this, GSOC encouraged supportive undergraduates to extol the benefits for undergraduates of TA unionization to each of their teaching assistants as well. Peña-Vargas was proud of this contribution. "I think we helped pump up a lot of the grad students," he explained. "I think our presence in classes and [later] on the picket line reminded strikers that they were not victimizing their students, that they were in fact struggling with their students for a cause that would benefit them both."

### **Strike!: The First Semester**

The question of what its picket lines would look like and how it would treat undergrads and others who decided to cross them were two of the many tactical decisions GSOC had to make after its membership voted 85% in favor of launching the strike. *The challenge of gaining the support of as many members of the campus community as possible and minimizing the active opposition of the rest, while taking actions disruptive and costly enough to force the university to cede its position, is perhaps the most fundamental issue at stake for any campus-based union attempting to craft a winning job action strategy.* Such decisions require a calculus that attempts to determine what tactics will place the most pressure on the employer: highly disruptive ones (e.g. a call for and attempt to enforce a complete cessation of campus activities) that smaller numbers of non-union members are expected to engage in, OR less disruptive ones (e.g. moving classes off campus, holding large rallies) that relatively more people are expected to

participate in. Decisions also rest on assessments of what members themselves are willing to do and what restrictions on sympathetic job actions are included in the contracts of other unionized employees at the institution. At NYU, other unionized employees were contractually prohibited from engaging in sympathy strikes. When setting strategy, organizers must consider the degree to which the potential unwillingness of other constituencies to accept a difficult “ask” will impinge on the morale of strikers and bolster the administration. When some members of its Organizing Committee argued that GSOC had to attempt to shut down as much of NYU as possible, staff and other members asked, “And when just about everyone on campus crosses the picket line anyway, how will we feel? How successful will the strike be then?”

When the strike began, the GSOC Organizing Committee, counseled by UAW staff, urged undergraduates and faculty members to show support by holding and attending classes off campus as a means of honoring the picket line, but did not attempt to shut down the university or to physically restrict access to the buildings it picketed. GSOC asked faculty to petition and lobby the administration, urged undergraduates to display their sympathies using pins, stickers, and armbands, and encouraged everyone to join in the daily pickets. The union continued urging non-NYU guests to boycott campus events. Although undergraduate activists and union staff alike knew that obstructive acts of civil disobedience undertaken by students had proven effective in recent campus-labor conflicts, the possibility of actions of this sort were never directly discussed.

During the early weeks of the strike, more than a thousand students signed a pro-union petition, and hundreds wore union pins, stickers, and armbands. Students encouraged professors to move classes off campus, and attended classes that were moved without complaint. GSOC staffers found off campus locations for more than 500 classes during the fall semester. A week into the strike, campus opinion appeared to lean heavily in favor of the union. The Washington Square News, NYU’s student newspaper, editorialized that “[i]ncreasingly, [a] gulf exists not only between the administration and the Graduate Student Organizing Committee, but between the majority of our campus and the administration, which is supported by a vocal minority” (“Ignoring GSOC,” 2005). Such support was visible when, two weeks into the strike, students packed one of the largest lecture halls on campus beyond capacity for a faculty organized pro-union teach-in. In the days that followed, hundreds sent postcards home to parents encouraging them to view a union-created web site before taking sides in the matter. Kristin Campbell, a GUS member who had been involved in numerous student activist efforts in her four years at NYU later explained, “I had never seen so much undergrad involvement, support, and general non-apathy about an issue. It was empowering that people were coming up in droves, trying to figure out how to help.”

Despite consistent efforts to clarify what the union was asking of undergraduates, many students were confused about the significance of picket lines. Campbell sensed that early in the strike “a lot of undergrads were scared of the picket line.” Based on previous experience with or knowledge of labor strikes, they assumed pickets were meant to prevent access to buildings. While visiting a class that had been moved off campus, a student told me, “I thought it was going to be way more intense—that the picket lines were going to be everywhere and it was going to be pretty much impossible to get around campus.” While many students were relieved not to face a “hard” picket line urging or preventing them from entering buildings, others found they could not contribute to the

strike in as sharp a fashion as they had planned. GSOC certainly did not *discourage* individual undergraduates from refusing to cross picket lines, but staff members insisted that it was folly to organize students to collectively refuse to do so. However, it made less strategic sense and was considerably more risky for undergraduates to refuse to cross picket lines individually than as an organized collectivity—even if that collective was a small section of the student body—since the impact would have been largely invisible, and no plan had been established for a group defense against the academic repercussions likely to be incurred. In the event, no undergraduates are known to have refrained from using campus buildings.

Student support, of course, was not universal. Although members of GSOC and GUS approached the College Democrats on multiple occasions, the student club refused to take a stand regarding the strike. It is hard to know how many students concurred with WSN opinion page contributor Matt Lutz when, in late November, he wrote, “When my educational experience — something I place a lot of value in — is disrupted, I don’t feel sympathy for those doing the disrupting....Every time a blast of yelling and whistling comes in through the window during class, I hate GSOC a little bit more.” If Lutz did voice the sentiments of a substantial number of undergraduates, student opposition during the fall semester remained, on the whole, non-confrontational and not particularly vocal. Resentment never hardened into an organized anti-union student group or campaign, as happened during previous academic labor strikes.<sup>4</sup>

After the strike began, members of GUS consistently walked the picket line, staffed the undergraduate information table, distributed leaflets to classmates and talked-up the strike during classroom debates. GUS members also worked to create a powerful visual presence for GSOC on campus. They were the only ones to make GSOC specific t-shirts throughout the strike. Their events had more attractive promotional materials than most GSOC events; they made many of the banners that were used, and they created spoofs of NYU advertisements and wheat-pasted them across campus. GUS created a half-dozen sticker designs, and made them ubiquitous on lampposts, bathroom stalls, and advertisements in the vicinity of campus. More than union leadership and most GSOC members, student activists recognized the need, in today’s mass-mediated political landscape, to create what Steve Duncombe describes as “ethical spectacles” (Duncombe, 2007).

Perhaps most significantly, however, a week into the strike GUS began to organize a large-scale “Day of Action” that would provide a forum for undergraduates to demonstrate their support of the union collectively. Eric Prindle, a law student who worked with GUS says, “The ‘Negotiate Now!’ Day of Action had the highest profile of everything we did and I think clearly represented a high point in our level of organization and creating a distinctive student presence in the overall GSOC campaign.” The Day of Action turned out to be the closest undergraduates came during the strike to implementing obstructive direct action tactics as a means of heightening pressure on the administration.

Organizers called for a class boycott, a lunch-time rally at the center of campus, and a joint teach-in and concert to follow. The class boycott proved a flop, but hundreds of students made their way to the rally, many arriving with large groups of classmates, as morning lectures let out.<sup>5</sup> Rather than pack the podium with a stack of stock speakers, organizers made the rally open mic (or rather, open megaphone) in order to give students



the opportunity to express whatever opinions *they* had about the then three-week old strike. This was a gamble that paid off, as those who chose to speak were overwhelmingly supportive of the union, but spoke from their experience and opinions, which made their comments qualitatively different from those that had been offered by strikers and guest labor leaders in rallies over the preceding weeks. A GUS member closed the rally by explaining that the group had a letter to present to NYU president John Sexton, and a banner they planned to unfurl inside the university library. (NYU administrative offices are located on the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> floors of the Bobst Library, a large rectangular building housing stacks on all sides of a huge, open-air atrium).

GUS members led the assembled crowd to join hundreds of graduate student picketers in front of the library. Then, instead of sending a small delegation to present the letter as planned, GUS members called for the entire crowd to enter the library—“to tell the administration how we feel.” To the astonishment of many, security guards allowed anyone brandishing an NYU ID card to enter for nearly ten minutes, and hundreds did. Some GSOC leaders were initially wary of this escalation and discouraged members from participating. When GUS members unrolled a massive banner across the floor of the library voicing the simple demand “Negotiate Now!”, security guards began to block the entrances and disabled all of the building’s elevators. Undeterred, a half dozen GUS members climbed the stairs to deliver their letter, while others led the crowd in chanting. After administrators claimed Sexton was unavailable to meet with the students, the delegation returned to the floor. Adopting a tactic from large outdoor anti-globalization protests, the assembled crowd read the letter aloud in unison, led by a GUS member requesting for everyone in the library to “repeat after me.” The demands of hundreds of students indignantly ringing throughout the sacred, usually hushed space of the library was a powerful, even transformative event. Still energized afterwards, the crowd climbed ten flights of stairs to demand a meeting with the president. An hour long sit-in ensued when security guards blocked demonstrators from continuing past the 10<sup>th</sup> floor. After debates about what to do next, with participants beginning to trickle away amid the confusion of the (somewhat) impromptu action, the group decided to leave the library, chanting “We’ll Be Back!” Many moved on to the planned teach-in and hip-hop performance held a few blocks off campus. Elevators in the library remained disabled for a week afterwards and additional security guards were posted.

Immediately after the library action, GUS considered carrying out a better-planned, longer-term building occupation, but decided to wait until after the semester break due to organizing fatigue and concerns about missing final exams. Moreover, GSOC members’ reaction to the Day of Action had appeared fairly ambiguous. While staff members conceded the action’s positive impact and those members closest to it were visibly excited and thankful, others seemed to have hardly noticed and began calling for a vote to return to work. Though the motion did not pass, GSOC chose to ride out the semester rather than try to build on the momentum established by the library takeover. After a month of noisy, disruptive picketing by strikers with no perceptible movement towards resolution, the WSN noted that some students seemed to be tiring of the conflict. Still, the editors sought to reverse the trend, composing an editorial headlined “GSOC supporters, stay true” (“GSOC supporters,” 2005).

### **Strike.: The Second Semester**

The second semester of the GSOC strike was experienced nearly unanimously as a very difficult time for union members and allies alike. The month long break between fall and spring semesters came as a welcome respite from an emotionally and physically taxing semester to strikers and those organizing alongside them. However, the fact that most staff and member organizers used the time to recuperate rather than to reorganize left GSOC under-prepared to resume the campaign as classes began in late January. During this period many graduate students returned to work and the enthusiasm of those remaining was put to the test by an apparent deadlock with the administration and grey, frosty mornings on the picket line. Frequently, no more than a half-dozen picketers represented the union where forty or more had before the break. After the holiday recess many faculty members moved classes back to campus with little opposition from students. Undergraduate support diminished sharply, sometimes turning to bitter resentment. GUS member Kristin Campbell recalls, "People got frustrated within a month or two months. Grades suffered substantially because they didn't have a TA. They became angry." It is hard to know if students would have maintained enthusiasm if GSOC appeared as vital as it did in the early weeks of the strike, but undergraduates made it clear that the decline in members' morale had a negative impact on the morale and the patience of would-be allies in the student body. Not surprisingly, this deflation of spirits was circular. GSOC organizer Susan Valentine senses that "support from undergrads meant a great deal to members of GSOC as a whole. Conversely, our members were often disheartened to see apathy or opposition from undergrads."

Sensing the shifting mood on campus, and recognizing that significantly fewer members were available and willing to dedicate time to the strike in the spring semester, GSOC leaders chose to shift attention away from campus organizing and mobilizing (of members and other constituencies) and focus energy on activities that often fall under the rubric of a "corporate campaign" or "comprehensive campaign." Staff and active members sought to develop and expand pressure tactics such as targeting NYU trustees at their workplaces, lobbying state representatives, and developing connections with religious and community organizations that might "put the heat" on administrators. While it appears that these tactics put some pressure on NYU, these efforts were largely invisible on campus, adding to the sense of lost momentum for strikers and other campus constituencies alike. The focus on off-campus constituencies indicated to members who supported the union but felt they could not continue to strike that they no longer had a role to play. Even some of those who continued to strike felt there was little they themselves could do to forward the strike, since hopes seemed pinned almost entirely on elected officials and others with "connections."

Statements on the Op/Ed page and comments made by undergraduates indicate that students saw themselves as a party to the conflict that demanded constant, concerted attention. A January 23<sup>rd</sup> WSN editorial titled, "Move it along, GSOC," described the union as floating in "a stagnant pool."<sup>6</sup> The editors claimed, "If GSOC wants to consider itself a viable, active organization, it needs to show the undergraduates that it is. Right now, GSOC appears weakened and complacent, self-assured that its cause is self-explanatory" ("Move it," 2006). Reflecting on the strike months later, GUS member Anne Rudnick concurred with this diagnosis. In her opinion, "Undergraduate support wasn't earned in the second semester and was often taken for granted." Such sentiments led GSOC to question the degree to which it needed to "perform" its strike for

undergraduates. While members felt that having large boisterous picket-lines every day was not their top-priority—since energy spent by members on other aspects of the campaign would likely do more to pressure the administration—they understood that many students (as well as faculty and other employees) judged the strength of the union solely or primarily on vibrancy and consistency of the picket-line. The willingness of many to support, or even tolerate, the union was dependent on how strong they perceived it to be, based on this criteria. Dave Hancock, a member of GUS, states, “I know that folks got tired of the withering picket lines, tired of the same old arguments and tired of tactics that seemed less to affect the administration and more to just bother and inconvenience students. Schleppling to a different class site off campus in the name of a campaign that really seemed to be going nowhere just didn't seem worthwhile for most students, even the progressive ones that I knew in my classes. It also, frankly, didn't seem too much fun to most people to go and march around with a sign in the freezing cold in the same place everyday.”

Undergraduates also grew increasingly frustrated over the course of the spring semester with the union initiated call for speakers, performers, and other guests to boycott NYU events. Though the boycott began months before the strike began, it required the publicity of the strike for it to gain traction and substantially disrupt campus extra-curricular activity. From the outset, the scope and purpose of the boycott were unclear to many students. The call to boycott public events held on campus seemed to be at odds with the union's “soft” picket line policy. Furthermore, GSOC was unclear as to whether it would target only high-profile events organized by the administration and academic departments, or whether it would also discourage events initiated by student clubs from being held on campus. Even student clubs supportive of the union felt placed in a bind by this request since they were only allocated student activity funds for events held on campus. Honoring the boycott not only meant losing the ability to host events for the year, but potentially for future years as well, since unspent funds were grounds to lower allocation of activity fees to their organizations in the next budget cycle. The issue came to a head when the College Democrats organized an internship fair at which members expected to be interviewed by local elected officials or their staff members. GSOC picketed the event after club members, given short notice, refused to move the fair off campus. Recognizing the importance of the labor vote (in a way their aspiring student protégées did not), few staffers chose to cross the picket line. Although the action was considered a victory by some union members and staff, infuriated College Democrats heaped scorn on the union in person, in the newspaper, and over the internet at a time when undergraduate support was already in decline.

The second semester of the strike was also hard on Grad/Undergrad Solidarity. The group had, until this point, focused its energies on educating and mobilizing other students on campus. When GSOC all but abandoned campus organizing, members of GUS found themselves at a loss for how to usefully contribute to the campaign. Some GUS members also felt less valued personally by GSOC members when their work was no longer seen as central to the campaign. Feeling the flagging morale on campus, members of the group thought strong concerted efforts were needed to demonstrate that union members and their supporters were still committed to winning the strike. GUS members remained willing to engage in an action such as building occupation but worried their group lacked enough members to do so alone (almost half a dozen stalwarts

had departed for prearranged semesters abroad) and they expressed doubts about the efficacy of such an action if GSOC members themselves were unable or unwilling to take actions. To solve this dilemma a group comprised of GSOC and GUS members interested in rebuilding the campaign on campus through direct action met to hash out plans. When GSOC staff members found about these efforts, however, they moved to quash them.

Disappointment with having its action rebuked was compounded by other frustrations for GUS members. GSOC faced mounting criticism from its members for its non-transparent decision making process, its inattention to the specific concerns of international students and students of color, and its unsatisfactory handling of complaints about sexist and homophobic remarks made by members. These criticisms filtered down to undergraduate supporters through picket-line conversations and other informal channels. For a group of students who had decided to dedicate time to the campaign because they viewed it as part of a larger constellation of efforts fighting for radical democracy and against all forms of oppression and exploitation, the disheartening news of these internal conflicts seriously tested their will to continue. GUS members began to feel disillusioned about the “structure, secrecy, and hierarchy of the union,” as one member put it. This collective sense of marginalization led to resentment over the fact that GUS members had never been invited to participate in Organizing Committee meetings or other forums where strike plans and policies were decided. After floundering for more than a month, the group nearly dissolved. “It was hard to be an ally when GSOC wasn’t helping itself,” explained Annie Rudnick, a third-year student and member of GUS. “When GSOC fell, we really fell.”

In mid-March, with the strike at its lowest point, UAW leadership decided to shift staff and strategy, and dedicated additional resources to the campaign. After spring break, twelve GSOC members (including myself) were hired as researchers and organizers. The organizers prioritized one-on-one meetings with each member of the bargaining unit to reestablish consensus about the need to continue the fight and to demonstrate majority support for the union. Hopeful that this new direction would revive energy, GUS members cautiously rededicated themselves to the cause. They decided to produce a zine—a homemade, photocopied magazine—which both recounted high points of the strike and attempted to refocus discussion and commitment to the continuing fight. Although the drive to reorganize the bargaining unit raised hopes to some degree among graduate students as the spring semester wound down, undergrad support never rebounded to any significant degree. As the semester ended, GSOC members voted to call a “recess” to the strike and resume teaching during the summer and fall semesters, understanding that the tactics it had placed faith in had proven insufficient to force NYU to recognize and bargain with the union.

In all, it seems that undergraduate support for the strike declined in the spring semester because 1) the negative effects of the strike in their lives and studies were dragged out and piled up over a long period without visible signs of progress in winning the strike, 2) they were not sufficiently organized, and 3) they were not inspired.

### **The Challenges of Organizing Undergraduates**

A few months after the strike recess, GUS members reflected on their experience. They celebrated the positive contributions they had made—class visits, the Day of

Action, the zine—and tried to assess the mistakes or shortcomings in the undergraduate aspect of the campaign that they felt contributed to the inability to win to date. They placed some of these mistakes on their own shoulders, and some they saw as outgrowths of decisions made by GSOC.

**It was very difficult to get many undergrads to participate in picket lines.** GSOC and GUS were never able to establish mass picket line participation, even though they tried several tactics, including publicizing a specified time for undergraduates to join in each day and giving out free food on certain occasions. This may indicate a reticence among undergraduates to involve themselves with the union itself, or the discomfort of undergraduates to interact with graduate students outside the bounds of the prescribed teacher-student role. Dave Hancock believes a number of issues were at play. “An undergrad doesn't feel uniquely empowered when he or she is invited to step into a pen of shivering grad students. No undergrad wished they were fighting the GSOC fight as a GSOCer. They wanted to fight it as an undergrad.” One apparent reason for the success of the November 30<sup>th</sup> Day of Action was that it was billed as an opportunity for undergraduates to participate on their own terms. Hancock wishes, in retrospect, that GSOC and GUS had created other opportunities of the sort. “I feel like there should have been less conventional ways for undergrads to get involved designed to demonstrate that we had unique power as unique stakeholders in the community—power that could be exercised unlike any other folks on campus through alternative channels and mechanisms.”

**GUS activists regret that they did not continue class visits after the strike began.** Doing so could have helped to counter the administration spin and keep other undergraduates informed about the prospects for the union winning. Class visits, however, required a substantial time commitment and a pool of undergraduate activists who had enough experience with the campaign and confidence in their speaking abilities to be able to adequately convey a pro-union perspective to fellow students. The challenges of recruiting and developing the skills of new members posed a substantial challenge to regularizing rounds of class visits. While core members chose to sacrifice personal interests and commitments to dedicate time to class visits and other GUS work initially, many found it hard to continue to do so as the strike continued month after month.

**It was challenging for GUS to retain members.** “We were weak on expanding active participation by non-union members beyond a core group, especially after the Day of Action and generally as the strike wore on,” admits Eric Pringle, a law student involved with the group. Part of the difficulty lay in finding ways to involve newcomers which quickly instilled a sense that their time and energy was valuable. GUS was most successful at integrating newcomers during the build-up to the Day of Action. This was a large, tangible effort, controlled by students, that required a number of different skill sets. Students organized themselves into a variety of sub-committees, including ones that drafted the letter to be delivered to the university president, a publicity committee that created and wheat-pasted original artwork, a committee to create a guerrilla theatre skit for the event, and a committee to recruit speakers and help with the logistics. This variety gave newcomers a choice of activities where they could best use their skills, and having the larger tasks broken down made it possible to see how individuals' contributions were important to the success of the whole project.

**The undergraduates did not have a solid organizing orientation.** In the lead-up to the strike GSOC and GUS viewed the group's main task as educating their fellow students about the union and strike in hopes that they would decide to support the campaign. Less attention was paid to expanding and solidifying GUS itself, and implementing an organizing model was never strongly considered by members of either group. While organizing undergraduates to act in solidarity would necessarily take different forms than a drive to organize new union members, certain skills could be transferable. GUS members were not encouraged or trained to methodically pursue and develop the interest, participation, and skills of potential activists. While GSOC offered some GUS members training in how to deal affectively with media, it never offered training in face-to-face organizing. In a campaign with more resources, the union might offer a weekend-long organizing institute for students, or even consider hiring some to work part-time as paid organizers.

However, the reticence to organize more systematically also stemmed in part from issues raised by GUS members. Some expressed concern that the group could get too large, and that union-style organizing techniques were authoritarian. As discussed above, GUS initially took shape around a core of activists who had worked successfully as a small group in past campaigns. Kristin Campbell explains that, "From the beginning, most of the core-members of GUS were serious about creating a non-hierarchical, anti-authoritarian structure based on a modified consensus decision-making model. Most of us entered into organizing at a moment where this kind of model was deemed the *only* acceptable model, and was seen as the most liberatory. The global justice anarchists take responsibility for this model as their own, but some of us recognized and deeply respected its history in earlier feminist and anti-racist movements."<sup>7</sup> At one meeting some members of the group argued that working with substantially more members made it difficult to make decisions using the consensus process, which privileged extensive discussion and attempts to incorporate the perspective of everyone involved. They believed the group could get more done if it remained a small unit. The idea that decisions are harder to make with a large group might have been seen as a counterweight to the advantages of consensus, and a factor used to evaluate the technique's overall success, rather than a reason to shy away from greater participation.

This hesitancy to grow seemed to stem from the experience of previous campaigns where student groups could only garner a handful of dedicated participants. In those campaigns, the members of the core group had to assess whether their time was best spent recruiting or taking on lots of work themselves and getting down to business. They were caught off guard, then, by the flood of volunteers in the first week of the strike. In some ways the structure made it difficult to incorporate and empower these new recruits. Campbell explains, "spouting terms like 'non-hierarchical' and 'anti-authoritarian' came to stand in for many *organizing* basics like tactical outreach, making real connections with folks, providing responsibility to others, and solidly building with other groups. At some point, as substantial numbers of new folks started flooding into GUS meetings a nominal cry of non-hierarchical/anti-authoritarian/consensus didn't hold water when it came to actually plugging unfamiliar folks into meaningful and empowering tasks, work, and responsibility." Campbell also believes that GUS had an "ambiguous and implicitly seniority-based structure" that resulted from the fact that some

members had worked together previously in the Coke campaign. Combined, these issues “made it hard for GUS to keep up its momentum.”

### **The Student-Group/Union Relationship**

The relationship between members of GUS and GSOC began amicably amidst a shared sense of dedication and excitement about the campaign. Not surprisingly, frustrations and divisions developed over the course of the year of collaborative action. The relationship that developed between GUS and GSOC can be used to discuss more generally the nature of partnerships between unions and student groups.

**The dynamics and quality of personal relationships between union members and student allies are important.** Ageism and sexism are important forms of oppression that unions need to deal with. Members of GSOC were generally glad to have the support of undergraduates, and many found their fierce dedication and excitement for the campaign endearing. A few members began affectionately calling GUS members “the kids,” “the children” or even “the babies.” The use of such terminology replicated the way many teaching assistants refer to their students privately and reiterated the difficulty for some of operating outside the mindset of the teacher-student relationship on which most prior graduate undergraduate relations were based. However, because of the closer working relationship necessitated by the strike, it wasn’t long before GUS members caught wind of this language. Not surprisingly, they found it fairly insulting and regarded it as example of paternalistic age discrimination. On the other hand, the closer than normal relationship that arose between some graduate and undergraduate students raised the question of the appropriateness of dating across the differences of age and life experience. This raised the specter of sexist power dynamics magnified by age differentials. Neither group established an official policy on dating. While “picket line crushes” became a regular topic of conversation on cold morning picket shifts, members of GSOC and GUS, with a few exceptions, refrained from adding romantic or sexual relations to the already charged inter-personal dynamics at play.

**Unions and student organizations have different organizational structures.** During its strike, GSOC functioned similarly to a union in an organizing drive. It was organized on a three tier approach with staff and a small, shifting coterie of members driving planning, an Organizing Committee that elaborated and attempted to carry out organizing, and the general membership which the OC sought to motivate. Neither organization clearly elaborated its organizational structure to the other, sometimes leading to confusions about how decisions were made and by whom. Campbell explains that, for most of the campaign, “We never had any real idea about the specifics of how decisions got made.” This made it difficult for GUS to bring ideas, suggestions, and concerns—especially about interactions with undergraduates—to the union.

These different approaches to creating organizations are not necessarily irreconcilable. They reflect two attempts to organize collective action in a way that balances values of participation, equality, and effectiveness. Over the course of the campaign, each group had to face shortcomings of its approach, and ended up recognizing the valuable aspects in the other’s structure. It seems clear that a discussion at the outset of the collaboration clearly outlining the organizing and decision making principles of the organizations would have created more clarity and common ground. The groups would not have to fully endorse each other’s structure, but they would have a

much better sense of the terms on which they were entering into coalition. These terms of collaboration, or the principles in which the groups interacted, also became a site of tension.

**GSOC leaders seem to have held somewhat contradictory impulses towards the amount of independence GUS should be given.** One of its goals was to send a clear and consistent message to the broader undergraduate community about why it was striking and what students should do to support the strike. GSOC also worked hard to control its “messaging” to the press in order to win the support of politicians and the public, and bruise NYU’s image. To achieve these goals, GSOC sought a significant amount of control over GUS in order to keep student activists “on message.” In this regard, GUS members were envisioned as auxiliary organizers of GSOC itself. Yet GSOC also hoped for and was happy to reap the benefits of independent actions taken by undergraduates (the library occupation being the prime example) that it didn’t feel its members could be involved in planning. In these instances, undergrads were more usefully portrayed as wild cards inspired by the struggles to take action outside the union’s hands—a symbol of the unknown and uncontrollable forces sure to break out in reaction to the campus crisis caused by administrative intransigence.

This tension played out in questions of resource allocation. GUS depended on use of the UAW’s copy machine to produce leaflets and the UAW staff required they approve all materials that were being run-off on their dime. This is understandable, but it delayed turn around time on written materials and led to a reduction in student voice; after copyediting undergrad communications took on the tone of union communications. The UAW also controlled the large email list of undergraduate supporters (overwhelmingly collected by GUS) who wanted updates from GSOC. Members were often too busy to write these, and so the list was underused. When messages were sent out, they again originated from graduate students or union officials, rather than other students.

**Students were not offered a place in the strategic planning of the campaign.** Viewed as auxiliary organizers or as wild cards, GUS members were not offered significant input into GSOC’s overall planning. Rather the plan was established by the union, and undergraduates were asked to help out or plug in. One, and sometimes a few, GSOC members attended all GUS meetings and reported back to the union organizing committee. The link between the groups for most of the campaign consisted of one or more GSOC members attending GUS meetings, and acting as informational conduits. GUS members often came to the union office to carry out work, but were not invited to attend union OC meetings. This structure was not limited to undergraduates. With a few exceptions GSOC members agreed that no outside groups or representatives should attend OC mtgs. Also, no other group, including Faculty Democracy, asked. It wasn’t until late in the campaign, when student activists were feeling disillusioned that they had a formal meeting with the lead organizers of the strike.

Kristin Campbell now feels strongly that undergraduate activists had a right to help establish strike strategy. “First of all, we had been through fighting the administration in an earlier campaign. We had experience. We also had an understanding of why we were there. Our mentality was, ‘We’ve been working on labor for a long time, it makes sense for us to be working on this.’ We were putting in a lot of hard work and energy—more than many members of the union who were able to attend meetings. On top of that, we had a much better sense of undergrad opinion on campus. I



really feel that since we were willing to put ourselves on the line so much, and commit so much to the strike, that gives us the right to be in there strategizing and helping to make decisions.”

Campbell explains, however, that this perspective developed over time. “At the beginning, we didn’t really feel like it was our place, since we were a solidarity group, not the group actually fighting for its issues.” Campbell related the question of leadership to lessons she had learned from studying points in the civil rights and feminist movements when organizers had insisted that those directly affected by the injustice being confronted had the sole right to determine the course of the struggle. Such organizers argued that the most affected should lead, since they had the most to gain or lose, and because organizations needed to develop the political skills of formerly marginalized people and groups. However, when GSOC members began to voice serious misgivings about how democratic union decision making actually was, how respectful and welcoming union events were to women and queer people, and whether the union accounted for the ways in which race and citizenship affected how members could participate in the strike, the analogy with these earlier movements no longer held as much water for GUS activists.

Again, it seems that inventive thinking could establish structures that value the unique insight of undergraduates and other allied groups, while emphasizing the prerogative of the striking group to lead its own struggle. Certainly, undergraduates never asked for complete control of the strategy—rather they wanted to be involved in conversations whose outcomes affected how they spent their time. The place where undergraduate opinion about strategy diverged most sharply from GSOC leadership’s was over the importance of increasing levels of obstruction and confrontation on campus through civil disobedience and direct action tactics.

**Should allies take more risks than members?** Staff members were reticent to undertake actions such as banner drops, building occupations, and hunger strikes for multiple reasons. This limited the union to using only the tactical playbook expected and prepared for by NYU and the union-busting law firms it hired. When they first took on the campaign, many members of GUS assumed that direct action would play a significant role in the campaign. “We were all affected by GSOC blocking Bobst before the school year started,” explained one member, referring to the symbolic act of civil disobedience GSOC members and their allies engaged in on the day the first contract expired. GUS members with years of experience challenging NYU policies were “coming from a perspective where direct action seemed like the only way to get things we wanted.” To win anything, they felt that direct action “had to be part of the conversation, at least be on the back burner.” The group was surprised then, when it began to “seem like direct action wasn’t on GSOC’s mind, or something that was wanted.”

During GSOC’s original campaign for recognition, undergraduate labor activists planned to occupy a campus building shortly after the strike began with the knowledge and support of the union (Jessup, 2003). In 2005, however, the possibility of direct action tactics was not discussed. Why was this? As Charlie Eaton, an undergraduate student leader in the 2001 campaign, saw it, a student building occupation formed one aspect of a strike strategy that put a premium on shutting down NYU. In 2002 he wrote, “The threat of a strike was unquestionably what forced NYU to recognize the union. However, grad union leaders insist that undergrad organizing was essential to the

campaign. NYU knew it could not win, because most undergrad students would refuse to cross GSOC's picket lines along with the five major unions at NYU. In addition, a large core of undergrads would actually disrupt university operation on top of the strike" (p. 53). Since NYU caved hours before a strike vote was taken in 2001, it is impossible to know how a strike at that time would have played out. It is clear, however, that GSOC approached the 2005 strike believing that most students *would* cross picket lines if it asked them not to, and anticipating very little support from other campus unions. The No-Strike clauses in their contracts were seen as sacrosanct; any form of work disruption, therefore, was off the table. GSOC leaders reasoned that if they could not ask other workers not to cross picket lines, it would be unfair to ask undergraduates to refrain. On these grounds, GSOC abandoned the possibility of fully or partially shutting down campus. In this situation—where it was assumed the strike would not be won through disruption—direct action by undergraduates was not actively discouraged, but neither was it encouraged or viewed by GSOC leaders to hold much potential to significantly influence the struggle. When members raised the possibility of such actions, staff members made it clear that they should not be discussed in the union office or in any official capacity. One intimated that student direct actions had contributed to the union's past victories at universities, and that similar efforts could benefit GSOC's campaign. "There are things that others will do, that we won't even know about, and that's fine," she said. By implication, GSOC members were not to be involved.

It is interesting to note that even in 2001, when undergraduate direct action was supported by GSOC organizers, the possibility of involvement by union members themselves was apparently never seen as a possibility (much less a necessity). When, during the 2005-06 strike, GSOC members, including myself, suggested members engage in direct action tactics in the face of declining momentum, leaders rejected them firmly on a number of grounds. Dissecting the logic of each of these claims is important, if we are to fully evaluate the logic that bolstered GSOC's failed strategy. Many union leaders conceptualized disruptive actions as "student activist" tactics rather than "labor" tactics. Since NYU based its refusal to recognize the union on the assertion that graduate employees were students, not employees, the UAW thought that any actions that might lead potential allies (presumably politicians) to associate union members with college students could undermine the legitimacy of graduate employees' claim to "worker" status. Secondly, leaders claimed the potential repercussions of such actions were too high—members could be arrested and further disciplined by the school. Besides, it was argued, graduate student workers had already taken a militant action that demonstrated their commitment and bravery—they had struck their work. Leadership and staff members repeatedly advanced one final claim in debates over direct action: "No one action is going to win this thing. It's going to be a combination of pressures that eventually convinces them it's in their interest to settle." Disruptive actions, they worried, might appear as desperate, last-ditch efforts.

The insistence on using "labor" tactics rather than "student" tactics demonstrates a shortness of vision and is based on an unhelpful and unnecessary dichotomy. Labor has historically won significant victories when it has pioneered new tactics. The UAW only had to look to the invention of the sit-down strike by its own members in the 1930s to recognize this fact (Fine, 1969). Furthermore, tactics are not inherently linked to one type of social movement or another, but depend on how they are framed by the people

engaging in them and publicizing them. To extend the analogy, the occupation of administrative offices at a university could be framed as a sit-down strike in the academic workplace. The fear that “non-labor” actions could lead supporters to question the “worker” status of graduate students, and thereby withdraw support, implies that the power needed to win the strike rests more in the hands of a nebulous public or well-connected politicians, than it does in the strikers themselves. In the GSOC strike it required members to place faith in outside pressure that in the end proved insufficient. It is hard to evaluate whether some potential allies actually would have been demobilized by escalated tactics. The assumption, with no proof, that it was an either/or tactical choice prevented GSOC and undergraduate supporters from mobilizing bodily pressure at the same time others exerted political pressure. Finally, graduate student unions have consistently argued that teaching and research assistants are BOTH students and workers, and they have effectively conveyed this message to the media. There should be no reason, then, why the union should shy away from tactics that could be seen as indicative of that dual nature. Tactics should be chosen according to what is known to be most effective at beating the institution being targeted, not according to which are most recognizably linked to the type of movement taking the action.

The fact that GSOC encouraged students to engage in such actions in 2001 and celebrated the brief undergraduate building occupation in 2005, and yet actively discouraged its members from engaging in further direct action, raises another important question. Is it fair to encourage allies to engage in actions that members of the union won't? An affirmative answer to this question has to be based on the assumption that such actions involve fewer repercussions if carried out by non-members. Either the allies will be punished less severely by authorities or the actions will not reflect (as) negatively on the credibility of the union. Union members don't have to be willing to undertake the exact action the students are, but they should demonstrate that they are still fighting to the best of their ability, given the different risks and forms of privilege associated with their social position (as immigrants, women, people of color, etc.) In the GSOC case, grad students had most of the same privileged protection that undergraduates did (though considerably more were international students with fewer protections). Graduate students depend on the university for a paycheck which constitutes their main source of income, while most undergraduates don't. However, both groups face a lower risk of being dismissed from the institution as punishment than most workers do from their jobs.

Campbell explains, “We were not going to be the forerunners of some kind of occupation if the constituency that is actually striking isn't even thinking about doing something like that. We were waiting for the energy to come from grad students on strike. We felt that's where the energy needed to originate and then we could jump in and be a help in any way that we could.” While in other aspects of the campaign, undergraduates were expected to follow the lead of union members and leadership, they were expected to take on the risks of direct action on their own accord. When asked if the situation would have been different if the people striking were, for instance, older service workers with families and a higher chance of being fired, Dave Hancock said, “Definitely. I think we wouldn't have expected them to take the lead in that situation.” Even in that case, however, Hancock believed the group would not have engaged in risky actions without clear consultation ahead of time with the union and workers in question. Here again, clearer conversations about what GSOC and GUS expected of each other

would have been productive. This was hindered by GSOC's disinclination to have undergraduates attend OC meetings, and the insistence that potentially illegal actions not be discussed openly at union meetings.

The final claim that "no one thing" will win the strike is hard to argue with, but should be seen as an argument *for* rather than *against* direct action. Such a conviction should only be seen to deter direct action *if* it is assumed that engaging in direct action will prevent other actors from exerting pressure, and *that* pressure is assumed to be more effective than the pressure resulting from the direct action. It is impossible to know which form would have been more effective in the GSOC strike, but the outcome of that strike proved definitively that the amount of economic and political power the UAW was able to leverage was *not* enough.

### **Assessing Strategy from an Undergraduate Perspective**

**The union didn't consider strongly enough the expected timeframe of undergraduate support.** Throughout the strike union staff members encouraged a strategy of "holding-out." They reasoned that if union members demonstrated their resolve and staying power, the university would eventually concede rather than continue to deal with the annoyances and embarrassment of the strike. But as the second semester wore on with no caving by the administration in sight, GSOC found itself without a clear strategy. After spring break and under new leadership, a similar idea prevailed: if we rebuild "momentum," the administration will understand the strike is on an upward trajectory, becoming more powerful and disruptive rather than less so, creating the rational incentive for them to cut their losses and negotiate.

In a campus strike, the union not only has to organize and keep organized the entire bargaining unit, but also needs, to some extent, to keep students and faculty organized. At NYU this meant maintaining the determination not only of its 1,000+ members, but also of a substantial number of the 40,000 or so other members of the NYU community on whom it depended for moral support and supplementary action against the administration. Sustaining all these people over a long period of time is incredibly difficult. Semester breaks kill momentum even more than the groups involved expected—they do so not just for strikers, but for student supporters as well. *In formulating this strategy, the union decided to request a certain kind of sacrifice from striking graduate students and their supporters. GSOC asked them to make a low-risk sacrifice of time and energy for a long period of time. An alternate strategy, such as one that sought to quickly and continuously escalate pressure on the university through confrontation and obstruction, would request a different kind of sacrifice—risking potentially greater personal consequences, but having to devote considerably less time.*

One serious, perhaps overriding, problem with the first strategy is that it does not marshal excitement, energy, and passion. There is no potential for people to be swept up, to take risks, to be carried by the moment if the principle is "staying the course." Such thinking made it extremely difficult to build a sense of real momentum on the ground and in the hearts of union supporters. The priorities and strategies of the union seemed to squander chances of building momentum, an energy that is crucial if maintaining undergraduate support for the union is considered an important goal.

**Direct action gets the goods.** Once it becomes clear that an institution is not going to take direction from the majoritarian sentiments of its various constituencies, the

role of those constituencies in working to achieve a goal is to raise the costs of the institution retaining its unjust policy. This means that the central role for undergraduates to have played in the strike was to help make it impossible for NYU to carry on with business as usual. To have done that, undergraduates would have had to do *more* than the union asked of them since it only requested for them to attend classes off campus, participate in picket lines, and express their support of the union to the administration. However, even the biggest picket lines, and hundreds of classes moved didn't interrupt the work of the university sufficiently. The strike proved that the union has to be more obstructive than the total conceivable interruption of the withdrawal of labor of the portion of the workforce it represents. Union strategy vacillated but ended up seeing the act of withdrawal of labor and picketing as symbolic rather than truly obstructive. These acts enacted the concept of "strike" but didn't, in themselves, exert the decisive power in the conflict. That work was transferred in large part to politicians and union staffers carrying out struggle on economic and image fronts. Further evidence of the usefulness and perhaps even the necessity of actions to immobilize campus can be seen in the recent victory of student organizers at Gallaudet University. Students there staunchly opposed the candidate selected by trustees as new president of the university because her perspective on the politics of deaf-culture strongly diverged from those of most students. The *New York Times* reported that in order to win their demands, "protestors locked down campus for several days and turned the university's entrance into a tent city of the disaffected. Last week, the protestors had seized overnight an administration building that houses the office of the president." Eventually, the trustees relented, "surrendering to months of *widening and unrelenting protests* by students, faculty, alumni, and advocates" (Schemo, 2006; my emphasis).

**Democratic campus blocs are essential.** If the Gallaudet example lends weight to the claim that unions need to be tactically flexible, creative, and bold during campus-based labor disputes, it also reinforces the need for unions to build and actively maintain permanent coalitions with as many other progressive constituencies as possible. During the strike at NYU, undergraduates and faculty supporters of the union began to frame their support for GSOC as part of a broader fight to create a more democratic and inclusive university. Relationships of this sort, that build unity between students, staff, and faculty based on political principle are likely to prove essential not only to labor struggles on campus, but also to the broader struggles against marketization highlighted by Dyer-Witheyford, Terranova, and Bousquet. Universities offer fertile grounds for such coalitions. Due to the close and long-term nature of the relationship, students typically harbor conflicted feelings about their institutions. They can appreciate and feel loyal to particular teachers, yet be displeased with the administration for myriad reasons (high tuition, bureaucratic headaches, limited housing options). These outstanding frustrations can be tapped by the union, which can try to harness resentment towards the administration, and use it to build support for the union. This can be done instrumentally, at times when the union is in need of support. However, it can—and I believe it should—alternately be done consistently and as a matter of course, not only when contracts are set to expire. That is, the union must present itself as an ally willing to devote resources, strategic suggestions, or its endorsement to campaigns that, among other things, seek increased student power, fight against cutbacks, demand curriculum or resources be devoted to the interests and needs of marginalized groups, or work to repel

renewed right-wing attacks on course content, funding, and hiring decisions in higher education.

GSOC did not know ahead of time that its strategy would not work, though the experiences of Yale and Columbia provided considerable cautionary evidence. The graduate student employee union movement, however, cannot afford to ignore the strategic lessons learned by GSOC over the course of the 2005-2006 school year. Member and ally organizing is fundamental. Issues of members' privilege, oppression, and difference are ignored at the cost of disintegrating faith in, and commitment to, the organization. Tactical creativity and variety, boldness, and a willingness to escalate are necessary not only to tighten the vise on administrators, but to maintain the attention and support of non-strikers whose support helps to maintain striker resolve. On a larger scale, the GSOC experience lends further weight to the notion that mainstream unions are stuck tactically in the era of Fordist compromise. Capital has taken off its proverbial gloves in dealing with unions but unions have not responded by reclaiming their right to tactical obstruction, property destruction, and even violent defense of picket lines. Therefore, radical, historically-minded union members and other politicized constituencies, including undergraduates, need to raise the stakes and drag unions along if they are to avoid being beaten, and badly so, every time they engage in a job action. I hope these reflections contribute to strategic conversations that move us towards more wins, and a stronger left presence on campuses and elsewhere.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> For a history of the initial GSOC organizing drive see (Jessup, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> The Campus Democracy Network, documented by Krupat and Tanenbaum (2002), that GSOC and nine other campus organizations had formed in the spring of 2001 to sustain labor and other progressive efforts on campus, sadly, was non-existent and almost totally forgotten by 2005—a casualty of the high-turnover and organizing fatigue that frequently beset campus efforts of its kind.

<sup>3</sup> Framing teaching assistant unionism as beneficial to undergraduates education is certainly not a novel organizing tactic. Daniel Czitrom recalls a pro-union undergraduate group named Students for Quality Education active at the University of Wisconsin in 1975 (Czitrom, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Kathy Newman (1997) regarding undergraduate resistance to graduate student unionization at Yale University. Clearly GSOC and its allies should claim some responsibility for winning the support of a majority of students and creating a climate where anti-union voices were restrained. In evaluating divergent reactions of students to union campaigns on different campuses, however, it is clear that multiple other factors need to be accounted for. Student demographics, the influence wielded by student government structures, and the level of pre-existing conservative student activity need to be assessed in the planning stages of campaigns and in the evaluation process afterwards. Conservative student groups at NYU are less active than their counterparts at many other schools. There is no conservative NYU student newspaper and conservative student groups host right-wing speakers infrequently. Student government at NYU is accorded a narrow mandate, and according to GUS activists, “has very little influence on how students think.” These institutions and others have provided a base in which

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students at other universities have organized against labor unions. GSOC was fortunate to not have to devote a significant amount of time and resources into minimizing their negative impact.

<sup>5</sup> In a post-action evaluation GUS members acknowledged that facilitating a class boycott by undergraduates on the scale they had imagined would require a more direct and comprehensive organizing strategy implemented over a longer period of time than the two weeks during which they had built support for the Day of Action.

<sup>6</sup> In January editorship of the Washington Square News was handed over to a new committee that was noticeably more ambivalent towards GSOC than its predecessors. Though it is difficult to gauge the degree to which this dampened editorial sentiment was reflective of or constitutive of a broader undergraduate discontent in the first weeks of the semester, it does reiterate the value of having the support of campus media, and the importance of encouraging progressive students to fill decision making and editorial positions whenever possible.

<sup>7</sup> For history and analysis of the challenges and benefits of such models for a variety of U.S. social movements, see Epstein, 1991 and Polletta, 2002.

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