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**CRITICAL YEAR:
WILL THE GRADUATE EMPLOYEE'S UNION REACH CRITICAL MASS
AT INDIANA?**

Nineteen ninety-eight will be a critical year for Indiana University's Graduate Employees' Union (GEU). We are on the verge of a new stage in our organization campaign and we are optimistic about our prospects. Of course for any union, especially one with such a transient — and often skeptical — constituency every year is critical, but this year will either see the GEU show that it can be a viable participant in campus governance — or that we are far away from achieving such viability.

The GEU is the recently renamed Graduate Employees Association, a student organization at Indiana University (IU) whose history dates back to 198. At that time graduate teachers (Associate Instructors, or AIs) were unhappy with their lack of medical insurance. The university maintained the fiction (and they maintain it still today) that graduate teachers are not employees and therefore do not deserve benefits. Strangely, graduate employees get ill nonetheless; some people might even go so far as to credit the workload and strain of graduate school as a cause of such illness. In 1989, a dedicated group of activists, calling themselves the Graduate Employee's Association (GEA), organized their colleagues around this issue and won a subsidized medical insurance plan for Student Academic Appointees (SAAs—a term covering AIs and other graduate students appointed to certain positions in the university structure, mostly but not always, having to do with teaching or research). The plan still exists today and has been improved, with graduate student consultation. Legally, all beneficiaries of this self-funded plan must be employees of the university. The GEA dissolved after it realized its primary goal.

Over the past three years the GEA has revived. A new group of activists has recruited members, raised the visibility of the organization, forged bonds with the Graduate Student Organization (the representative student government body sponsored by the Graduate School) revised the organization's by-laws and joined the Communications Workers of America (CWA). Much of that core group has left, finding jobs and other lives and leaving a handful of members to try to prevent the disappearance of the GEA.

Without the ability to collect dues and bargain with the university, creating a real presence on campus has been a struggle. The issues that should unite graduate students in attempting to better their lives here and prepare them for governance when they get academic jobs, often serve to divide them. Professors, burdened with teaching, research and governance duties, allow their advisees to dream of a future where research is primary, teaching wholly secondary, and governance is an afterthought.

In the past two years, the GEU (once GEA) has researched and negotiated a very important agreement with Local 4730 of the Communications Workers of America (which represents the clerical workers at IU) whereby the members of the GEU will be members in good standing of Local 4730 and will benefit from

their own sub-local to deal with issues that do not concern the clerical workers. This arrangement benefits both groups; the clerical workers and the CWA offer stability and visibility, which the graduate students currently lack. The graduate students will increase the numbers of the local and broaden the talent pool of the membership.

Though Indiana is a right-to-work state and the climate in the state as well as in the university is hostile to unions, the clerical workers have made some progress in negotiating better working conditions. It is our understanding that the GEU must be prepared to negotiate with little if any protection from labor law, but it encourages us that the CWA has experienced success in this state which other unions have abandoned for greener organizational pastures. The association with the CWA has necessitated changes to the GEU's by-laws, so a committee studied the old by-laws and those of other graduate student unions and proposed a new set. These by-laws were adopted all but unanimously at a meeting last year, as was our affiliation with the CWA which was, along with the association with the CWA, adopted all but unanimously at a meeting last year.

The next step for us is to sign up members and collect dues, but the university, after delaying as long as possible, has refused to deduct dues from graduate employees' pay on the pretext that graduate students are not employees. Because dues are fixed as a percentage of pay by the CWA constitution, the GEU has little latitude in what to charge and how to charge it. Discussions and research of alternative methods of collecting appropriate dues have occupied more time, and before a decision was implemented, the former leadership departed.

Fortunately, while universities constantly lose senior activists, they also constantly recruit new prospects and the GEU is happy to welcome an enthusiastic corps of new officers, mostly from the English Department, a traditional source of support for the union. We are finally ready to start our dues-paying organization drive throughout the campus in the new year.

There are two main categories of issues that face graduate students at IU (and elsewhere), once we have the membership to address effectively them: economic issues (pay, fees, workload and working conditions e.g.) and organization itself. We have adopted as our priority a living wage for graduate employees. We also want more standardization in compensation for graduate employees across the university, and more honesty in evaluation of student workloads. At Indiana Bloomington, graduate students do about half of the teaching. Official estimates of our workloads, as reflected in our contracts, are entirely fictitious; departments count courses with 15 students the same as other departments count courses where the AI is responsible for 50 or more. While duties also vary, there seems to be no consistent attempt by the university to evaluate and compare the actual work required by the various courses even in a single department or school, let alone campus wide. In response, we have formulated a survey to acquire data on the workloads of graduate student employees. We intend to evaluate workloads and to demand that the university compensate us for the work we actually do.

On top of the crushing workload of research and teaching and the pressure of mounting loans and an uncertain professional future, the isolation brought about by the transitory residency, disciplinary territoriality, and the romantic myth of the solitary scholar in the ivory tower, demoralizes graduate students and hinders their ability to organize.

Organization means overcoming this isolation, in itself a manifest good. Even before the first union demand is made or the first negotiation is undertaken, organization means making students see their potential power. Realizing that you are not the only one trying to eke out subsistence on loans and a second job can start the metamorphosis from despair and guilt to anger and resistance. The power of knowledge, facts accumulated by organized groups with institutional memory, can arm graduate student participation in campus governance, afford training for future "service" assignments and materially benefit graduate students.

We realize that not all of the many frustrations graduate students face are the result of malicious decisions by faculty or administrators, or even of culpable negligence. The dynamic of universities' governing committees seems to be that if we are not there, we will not be represented, our desires will not be heard and our needs will not be met. And that dynamic will not change once we have our degrees and the coveted job. Negotiated contracts are wonderful and equal participation in the bodies that dictate the conditions under which we live and work is a valid goal, but merely the right to be heard and the organization and knowledge to have something to say can materially benefit all faculty—graduate employees and professors—if they systematically take advantage of it. The confidence and hope that such small victories instill will motivate further action, leading to permanent representative institutions and continuing negotiations to improve our condition.

So we start the year optimistic, revitalized by new blood, ready to start an organization drive to recruit members and establish our presence in all the departments and schools of the university.

AFFILIATIONS

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