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## **INSTITUTIONAL MEMORY AND CHANGING MEMBERSHIP: HOW CAN WE LEARN FROM WHAT WE DON'T RECALL**

I read all of the contributions to this forum with interest, but none so much as Ed Fox and Curt Anderson's piece on the union in which I cut my own activist teeth, the organization formerly known as the Indiana University Graduate Employees' Association. Ed and Curt made some interesting points on the issues facing graduate student organizers involving strategic alliances, institutional resistance, and organizing.

For me, however, their statement "while universities constantly lose senior [graduate student] activists, they also constantly recruit new prospects" points to a problem which much of their review of the history of our organization demonstrates. That is, in any organization whose membership is intentionally temporary (and we do hope that all graduate student activists DO graduate), the institutional history/memory of its strategies, alliances and activities are necessarily ephemeral. This often means that each cohort of activists must reprise certain struggles again and again. Please don't mistake my intent here. I do not mean to suggest that GEU is doing something wrong; I am pointing out a problem which all graduate student organizations must face. Let me give some examples: the authors date the founding of GEA to 198 While this is the date of some of our strongest and best documented activity, the organization dates at least to 198 GEA really took off in October 1986: the administration of Indiana University committed a major misinterpretation of changes to the US tax code in that month; while administrators had publicly acknowledged that the new tax law seemed not to renew the tax exemption for graduate students' fee remissions, they repeatedly said that the university would "take care of things."

But in October 1986, university lawyers, in an error born of a zealous attempt to protect the institution, decided that Congress would not restore an exemption accidentally left out of the revised tax code and told the payroll department that they must withhold from the four remaining paychecks due to associate instructors [IU's title for teaching assistants], income tax on fee remissions for the entire calendar year. Some associate instructors received pay checks of only \$00 or less in that month. This shock galvanized many of us to activism; the Graduate Employees' Association increased its membership from c. 30 to c. 330 in that one month.

This crisis and the recruiting it enabled led to the "critical mass" of membership which Ed hopes to achieve again through hard work and education. For five years following this event, GEA had a large enough cadre of active leaders and a mass less active, but interested membership to allow us to make some advances.

Some time in the 1970s, a previous generation of graduate students won the right to elect three representatives to the 45 member Bloomington Faculty Council. Beginning in the 1987-88 academic year,

GEA followed a strategy of using the existing governance structures to achieve our goals. We elected three GEA members to the AI spots on faculty council for several years in a row. This automatically put union members on the campus AI policy committee and made us the "usual suspects" to be appointed to other committees to represent graduate students. It was through this avenue that we gained faculty council support for our health insurance benefits; after several years of work, BFC voted 40-4 to demand that the campus fund this benefit, taking money from faculty salary budgets if necessary.

While I think Ed and Curt are aware of more of the details of this effort than they mention in this brief essay, much of the detail of the tactics and alliances which gained this advance have been lost as most of the people involved graduated and left Bloomington. Their claim that "GEA dissolved once its goal was realized" suggests that, as the group had achieved only one major goal, they see it as a single-issue organization. This was not the case. The GEA faded out as its most active members graduated or ceased to be AIs and could not raise sufficient interest in others to carry on.

The GEA of the late '80s was a chapter of the faculty/staff local of the American Federation of Teachers; it was labor organization with a full range of goals and activities, not simply a single-issue health insurance advocacy group. While our alliance with AFT was a source of strength and funding, it was also a weakness. AFT forced GEA to share a local with the faculty chapter, even though faculty are the direct supervisors of graduate assistants. Clearly, these two constituencies have many issues in common and some in direct conflict. Also, hard as it is to believe, the reputation of the faculty who led the local at IU marginalized GEA even more than our own activism did. Clearly, while the clerical workers with whom GEU is affiliating may have less in common with the academic concerns of the AIs, neither group will ever hold hiring/firing and grievance settling authority over the other.

Ed and Curt's point about the anti-union climate in Indiana is something I remember well. Not only is Indiana a "right to work" state in terms of collecting representation fees as one of the other forum participants describes, Indiana public employees (a classification which includes AIs as employees of a public university) are excluded by state law from the NLRB; thus, no matter how many members a graduate student union might get, they cannot force recognition by the trustees. CWA was able to gain status as the bargaining agent of the clerical staff only by the "consent" of the trustees.

Another problem which GEU faces because of the failure of institutional memory is the problem of getting payroll deduction of dues. As a part of the AFT local, GEA had payroll deduction of dues from 1985 until I left the organization in 1991 I can understand the administration's interest in not aiding the GEU, but if there was a way for student labor organizations to retain some membership over the long term, they might remember that this right had once been held and could avoid having to spend time and effort to win it again.

Do I have a solution? Not hardly. I certainly don't advocate anyone delaying their degree more than is already often the case for student activists. And while I happen to remain at the university where I was active and am willing to share my personal memory with the group, this is an unusual and incomplete solution. All of the organizations represented in this forum and their peers face the problem that their institutional memory is crippled by the very nature of their constituency. Documenting activities can help, but organizations fade and grow, and new cohorts rarely have the time or inclination to read old activities reports. We are likely stuck with an oral tradition and must simply do our best to remember the strategies and tactics, the alliances and structures which have worked in the past and may again in the future.

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