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Negotiating for the Family: Unions and the Graduate Student Workplace

Although I do not have any special expertise in family issues, I was actively involved in building AGSE/UAW (the Association of Graduate Student Employees/United Auto Workers) at UC Davis, where I served as the first Campus Unit Chair. I was also on the system-wide bargaining team that negotiated the first union contract for the nearly 10,000 TAs, readers, and tutors from all eight UC campuses who are represented by UAW Local 2865. I can, therefore, speak specifically about how unionization has impacted families in recent organizing drives at the University of California.

It took us 18 years to get UC to sit down at the bargaining table, and nine months of protracted negotiations to hammer out the contract. Mark Quigley and Philip Zwerling have already described in these pages both the dedication of the activists and the benefits secured by their efforts. Some of the highlights of the contract include significant increases in both wages and fee remissions, the latter reaching 100% (a full tuition waiver) by the third year of the contract; workload protection; and protection against sexual harassment and discrimination. Unlike typical UC contracts, ours is fully enforceable by third-party arbitrators and mutually selected workload experts. This was a significant victory for us, since UC's history with other unions shows that contractual rights mean little without viable enforcement mechanisms to back them up. We also won language guaranteeing that Academic Student Employees working 25% time or more would receive as a benefit the health insurance mandatory for all graduate students at the University of California. Anyone interested in reading the contract in its entirety will find it at <http://www.uaw2865.org>.

These contract provisions benefit the families of Academic Student Employees, both directly and indirectly. The wage increases and fee remissions make it easier to support a family on an Academic Student Employee's salary. Workload protection means more time at home. Protections against discrimination make it difficult for management to fire an employee who might, for instance, be pregnant. And third-party enforceability means these provisions don't depend on the "beneficence" of our employers, who until recently described Academic Student Employees as spoiled children arguing over allowance. Our contract carves out a space for the family in the university, replacing the family rhetoric of management paternalism with concrete benefits and rights.

Needless to say, we did not win everything we wanted in our first contract. Eighteen years of struggle have taught us that changing the University of California takes patience. For instance, though we won the right to receive mandatory health insurance as a benefit, we were not as successful in negotiating the content of the plans. The argument has to do with the relation between the last two words in our title: how much of an Academic Student Employee is student, and how much employee. Under the current contract, all changes in health insurance must be approved by campus committees made up of both graduate students and administrators. At UC Davis, the committee, with members from our unit, expanded existing

coverage to include much-needed dental insurance; however, changes in the undergraduate health insurance plan, which is outside the committee's charter, made it almost impossible to salvage dependent care. The struggle over dependent care shows the union where it should take this fight in the future. No amount of committee work, no matter how amicable the committee, can replace the guarantees provided by a contract.

Something else we were unable to win in the first contract was childcare. We pushed for this at UC Davis because a workable model--the Perfect Tender Infant Care Cooperative--already exists at the university's King Law School. The law school provides space, and law students take turns watching each other's infants. There is no reason this parent cooperative model could not work in other campus locations. Initially, campus negotiators expressed interest in the idea since there is a shortage of inexpensive daycare in town, and since in the long run a cooperative would cost the university little more than space. Yet space, which is often the most valuable commodity on campus, proved harder to come by than other rights and benefits. The union will have to live to fight this one another day.

"Living to fight another day" became our mantra as we struggled to finalize the first contract. Negotiating is not a quick-fix, but it does provide a platform for long-term strategic battles. In the past, management tended to win the long battles because the institution has a memory, while activists graduate and move on. The union, however, provides an alternative to institutional memory, and an opportunity to pursue fights over several generations of graduates. Our health insurance and fee remissions are cases in point. Early union protests won these benefits in the 80s, and now, instead of coming as gifts each year, they are guaranteed for the life of the contract. If we win daycare and better dependent care, it will be in the same way, through organized struggle, and not through the beneficence of our employers.

University administrators, of course, oppose this kind of struggle. A common objection against unions is that they disrupt campus collegiality and interfere with the "mentoring" relationship graduates are supposed to develop with their faculty. The university is supposed to be one big happy family, capable of solving its problems through its own internal mechanisms and traditions. This model is misleading in several respects. The collegiality that exists in departments does not extend to the administration, which is a separate entity in a separate building, staffed by hundreds of managers most of us never meet. We develop close relationships with faculty, but we bargain with management. The happy family is an ideological formation, draped over the corporate policies that keep a multi-billion dollar institution like the University of California competitive. The separation between management and faculty is replicated at other levels of the institution. In many universities it is by no means exceptional for professors to teach social justice by day in classrooms that by night are cleaned by part-time workers with no security or benefits. Less egregious, but no less real, is the plight of the hundreds of thousands of non-unionized TAs across the country who do much of the work of educating without receiving the rights and benefits, or even the titles, of employees. The university's family rhetoric masks these problems by infantilizing its employees, denying, in effect, that they might have real families to support. By replacing the rhetoric of paternalism with the confrontational language of bargaining, unions bring genuine family issues like daycare and health insurance to the attention of the campus community.

I think family concerns will be a priority of UAW Local 2865 in the future. Since I recently graduated and am no longer in the unit, I cannot presume to speak for the UAW, or even as a current member of the union. However, I have seen what unionization can accomplish, and I know Academic Student Employees are committed to improving education by improving the conditions of employment. In today's information economy, where Academic Student Employees are workers in the factory of knowledge, we must insist on being treated not as wards but as workers. Achieving a better environment for families means dispensing with the myth that university is a family.

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union contract for academic student employees at the University of California, and he served as the first UC Davis unit chair. He is currently a postdoc at Davis and a member of the AFT, on leave for 2002-03 with a Fulbright grant in Berlin.