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### **ALWAYS ORGANIZE:**

#### *Clippings from the UE Local 896-COGS COGNITION Archive*

UE Local 896-COGS is the union of Teaching Assistants and Research Assistants at the University of Iowa. In any local union movement, communication unites workers with knowledge. A primary means of internal communication since COGS' inception has been the union newsletter. The following traces highlights from the five-year history of COGS (Campaign to Organize Graduate Students), Local 896 of the United Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers of America (UE), using excerpts gleaned from its official news organ, *COGNITION*.

Dating from COGS' affiliation with UE in 1995 to the start of the union's third round of contract negotiations with the University of Iowa in the fall of 2000, these excerpts provide a glimpse of how COGS members have responded to some of the key questions facing a graduate employee union as it moves beyond an initial membership drive and negotiations for a first contract. How do members from a wide diversity of academic disciplines participate in establishing union structure and practicing democracy within the organization? What role will members play in contract negotiations and in enforcing the contract on a day-to-day basis? How does a local of public sector academic workers build an effective relationship with its national affiliate, a traditionally industrial union? When and how should the union involve itself politically on campus or at the community or state levels? How does a union of academic workers in the Midwest fit into the larger global economy and labor movement? Well beyond an election victory and the struggle for a first contract, how can a graduate employee union build and sustain membership levels, leadership, and member involvement in a bargaining unit with inherently high turnover?

The history documented here also reflects circumstances unique to an independent, rank-and-file union fighting for public-sector employee rights in a "right-to-work" state where state law denies public employees the right to strike. Finally, though by no means a complete record, the excerpts below reflect an evolving union ethos built around member activism—in contract campaigns, in the vigilant defense of contractual rights, in issue-oriented political action, and in the development of a sustainable culture of face-to-face organizing on campus.

## December 1995

### *We're Building the Union!*

In July of 1995 a few stalwart supporters of COGS met after the slim election loss [of 1994] and refused to give up. They quickly rallied the support of hundreds of graduate employees. A stronger and wiser COGS emerged. Since September COGS members have canvassed the halls of the University of Iowa spreading our message of graduate employee needs and concerns and how a union can help us meet them.

We have affiliated with the United Electrical Workers (UE), a national union with a reputation for integrity, egalitarianism and rank and file control. We have been given our own local number, 896, and have opened an office. We adopted a UE Local 896, COGS "Program for Action". . . and now we are in the midst of our drive to build the membership of our union. . . (Susan Taylor)

## March 1996

### *COGS Lobbies State Legislature*

With a spring union certification vote in the wings and the allocation of a \$435 million state budget surplus at stake, UE Local 896-COGS rolled into Iowa's Capitol on President's Day, seeking out state lawmakers to put a face on the University of Iowa's graduate employee union-on-the-rise . . . . With lobbying experience at its side, legislative contacts established, and a rapidly growing membership, COGS will now concentrate on gaining certification through the Public Employee Relations Board. If you haven't yet joined the union, join now! (Sam Harper)

## March 25, 1996

### *Predictions of Myths to Come*

*The last few weeks before a union certification vote are usually rife with myths, rumors, and half-truths. These myths may arise from conscious efforts to confuse voters, or they may stem from a simple misunderstanding of the facts. The following are myths graduate employees can expect to hear in the coming weeks:*

. . . . MYTH: Graduate employees currently enjoy a "collegial relationship" with the UI administration that would be endangered by a decision to unionize. FACT: "Collegiality" is a good thing when it means graduate employees are treated as full partners in the university's teaching and research mission

— and entitled to a say in the decisions that affect us. In fact, it is for this reason that many faculty support our unionization campaign. By organizing a union, graduate employees are saying that we can speak for ourselves and that we have interests only we can represent. Sometimes these interests will be quite different from those of the UI administration. Gaining a union to represent our different interests will not make us "adversaries" of the administration. It will make us colleagues in the true sense.

. . . . MYTH: There is a link between unionization and FICA taxes. FACT: In the words of IRS representative Perry Blattner, "Unionization has nothing to do with it." We're already classified as employees by the university, the IRS and the Public Employment Relations Board.

. . . . MYTH: A union would mean the exclusion of graduate assistants from a variety of advisory bodies.

FACT: Graduate students serve on a wide variety of committees . . . and belong to a number of professional and departmental associations through which we contribute to academic policy and enhance our professional development. . . . According to Paul Young, President of the Graduate Student Senate (GSS), "Much of what the GSS currently performs involves issues not related to employment, and it seems to me it would be largely unaffected by whether or not there is a graduate assistants' union." . . .

## **April 19, 1996**

### *We Did It!*

The mandate is clear—with a decisive margin of 282 votes, graduate employees voted YES for unionization on April 16. Through the work of hundreds of graduate employees we've succeeded in reaching out and building an organization throughout the entire campus. For the first time, we will have a democratic organization capable of voicing the concerns and fighting for the aspirations of graduate employees.

. . . . The next step will be nominations and election of a seven person Negotiating Committee, as well as the adoption of an interim constitution for our organization. At our general membership meeting on April 20, we will nominate members for the negotiating committee and discuss proposals on diversity, the interim constitution and dues. We invite all graduate employees to join in and get involved in the exciting work ahead!

### *There is Power in the Union*

On April 16, graduate employees—from physicists to anthropologists, mathematicians to historians—drew on the lessons of history and decided that only a collective organization will protect us from insecurity and guarantee us an equal voice in the conditions of our lives. On April 16, TAs and RAs decided that collective efforts like COGS/UE can help preserve the university as a dynamic institution in American society by rewarding and recognizing one of its most vital resources—graduate employees. After celebrations have subsided, we must begin the serious work of coming together to build a strong union and an active membership committed to turning the YES votes into real gains at the bargaining table. Remember, there is power in the union. (David Colman)

## **August 1996**

### *\$12,500!*

In the first ever collective bargaining between UI graduate employees and the university administration, COGS has won big raises for TAs, RAs and GAs.

- We have raised the minimum base salary by 19%. This means a raise of \$2,000 in the base salary for academic year appointments, and \$2,444 for fiscal year appointments.
- It is not just those making the minimum base salary who have reason to be happy. COGS has negotiated average increases of 8% for TAs and 14% for RAs. . . .
- With this victory secured, we will begin to negotiate our first contract in September. Adequate health care is our first priority in negotiations this fall. . . . As we enter negotiations, our strength will lie in having a large and active membership, so sign your union card today! (Leslie Taylor)

**October 1996***Full Health Care Tops Union Proposals*

At the first round of fall contract bargaining, the UE-COGS Negotiating Committee presented the University administration with a full contract proposal including comprehensive health care for graduate employees. They were cheered on by UE-COGS members who packed the Indiana room at the IMU. . . .

Your participation is the Negotiating Committee's real strength at the bargaining table. The Board of Regents and the administration might not listen to reason, but they cannot ignore the collective voices of employees.

The Negotiating Committee is proud to serve our colleagues, but we remind you that *The Members Run this Union*. Be ready to mobilize. Be aware of the issues. . . .

The power we bring to the table is your voice. (Mike Evces)

**November 1996***A Night Out On The Town Brings New Members Into The Union*

The October 10 COGS Blitz has resulted in an increase of 100 members, bringing the total COGS membership to more than 500 people.

. . . . As with previous membership drives, the Blitz involved COGS members making personal house calls around Iowa City and Coralville. Doug Hertzler (Anthropology) explained, "House calls are the basic way of building a union." (Susan Roth)

**March 1997***COGS Wins Ground-Breaking Contract for Iowa Graduate Employees*

UE Local 896, the Campaign to organize Graduate Students, and the University of Iowa's administration and Board of Regents agreed to a historic contract . . . just 10 hours before arbitration was scheduled to begin on February 26.

The contract was overwhelmingly ratified by the COGS membership . . . . It provides protections against overwork, regulates appointment procedures, ensures paid leaves of absence, and provides across the board pay raises for the next two years.

One of the major achievements of bargaining was the creation of a comprehensive health care plan, one of the major issues around which the union was organized. The health care plan, to be called UIGradCare, is similar to the UI's professor plan. . . .

The contract was achieved only because of the hard work of COGS members. From the negotiating committee which spent hours with the administration and Board of Regents arguing our case, to rank and file members who protested at last December's grade-in, when we awarded the administration an "F" for health care, and last month's informational picket of the Board of Regents meeting, we showed we were

united.

### **September 1997**

#### *COGS Victory Report: Bargaining Unit Preserved*

Over the summer, COGS members stopped the university from tampering with the bargaining unit, and brought a member back under the protection of the COGS contract. The "bargaining unit" consists of 'all enrolled graduate and professional students with a 25% or more appointment . . . who provide a service to the university in exchange for salary compensation,' as defined in the Order of Certification given by the Public Employment Relations Board of Iowa.

In the Broadcast Service department, a COGS member was dismayed to find that his 50% RA position had been changed to a staff job—effectively removing him from the bargaining unit and the protection of the COGS contract. The change also brought a dramatic drop in pay, of course. Pressure from COGS members resulted in the restoration of this job to an RA position. With back pay for the month of July, the employee's salary jumped back up to COGS-negotiated levels in August. (Mike Evces)

### **November 1997**

#### *Stewards' Training: Building the Backbone of the Union*

When the day was finished we all left feeling that we truly had a sense of purpose. I for one really looked at how important my job was and I think that every steward there came to that realization. Perhaps the most important thing we came away with that day was that we have the tools to ensure a safe workplace for all graduate employees and that we as stewards have responsibilities to the entire graduate community. We are laying the groundwork for the future. And that is what I got out of the stewards training. Solidarity. THE MEMBERS RUN THIS UNION!! (Lionel Kimble)

### **March 1998**

#### *MEMBERS CHANGE COGS: Constitutional Revisions Make Member Participation Easier*

At the January meeting, the membership voted unanimously to hold a series of constitutional review workshops to update and improve our Local's constitution. Over the past two months, members of our Local met at three separate workshops to revise our constitution. The goal was to provide a forum for the membership to discuss changes needed, to reach consensus regarding these changes, and to draft language for these proposed amendments.

The changes fall into three main categories: clarifying job descriptions and making each position more manageable, focusing more effort on organizing, and reaffirming that the members run this union. . . . (Julie Schmid, Lars Peterson)

### **October 1998**

#### *Members Endorse Vilsack*

At its September 24th General Membership Meeting, the members of UE-COGS voted to endorse State

Senator Tom Vilsack for Governor of Iowa. Vilsack, a Democrat whose running mate is Sally Pederson, becomes the first political candidate that UE-COGS has endorsed since the union was formed in 1996. . . .

The membership of UE Local 896-COGS agreed that the clear contrast between the two candidates on the education and labor issues crucial to the future of Iowa . . . warranted the endorsement. (Jason Duncan)

## February 1999

*Rally for a Fair Contract: A Great Success*

*The COGS "Rally for a Fair Contract" held in front of the IMU on February 10 rocked the campus! Reports were that the over 100 COGS members' cries for a fair contract could be heard inside Jessup Hall (literally) and all the way to EPB! Several members at the rally requested a copy of Vice-President Julie Schmid's address, so here it is:*

As those of you who have been around the UI for a while know, COGS has significantly changed workplace conditions here at the university. In our first contract, we negotiated significant raises . . . . We negotiated a good health care package . . . . We negotiated protections against overwork and a legally-binding grievance procedure. We are trying to build on these gains this time around. One of the most significant gains we've made so far is that both COGS and the UI have tentatively agreed to a human rights clause. . . .

We still have a long way to go though!

We are fighting for decent wage increases for all graduate employees . . . .

We are fighting for decent child care options for TAs and RAs who are raising families . .

COGS is also fighting for improvements to our health care coverage. . . .

. . . . What we are fighting for in this contract are the basic rights that all workers deserve. . . . We know from our recent history that if we organize and stand together on these issues, they are achievable. It was through collective actions such as grade-ins, rallies, and mini-pickets that we won our first contract. . . . We wouldn't even have a union in the first place if we hadn't been willing to stand up and fight for it. . . .

. . . . Over the next few weeks, we need to continue to organize and educate. We need to wear our COGS buttons and Fair Contract Now! stickers everywhere. We need to write letters to the editor . . . We need to fight to make the UI a good place to work. (Julie Schmid) *Persistence Pays Off! Summer pay grievances resolved*

Last summer, many graduate employees opened their July 1 paychecks and got a rude shock. . . . Pay distribution had been altered, making the check several hundred dollars less than normal. After months of fighting with the University over summer pay distribution and raises, the Bargaining and Grievance Committee has reached a settlement with the University over grievances COGS 4 and COGS 5.

Faced with hundreds of signature from COGS members through a petition campaign earlier in the year, and the union's persistence after referring the grievances to arbitration, the university has finally agreed to extend the July 1, 1998 salary increases to those employees who did not receive them at the time in the form of back pay.

In addition, the union and the university have agreed to new contract language to clarify the implementation of future salary distribution and increases, so that unequal paychecks won't give graduate employees a rude shock again.

### *Community and COGS Come Together on Child Care*

The January 30th forum, "We Can Do Better: Addressing the Child Care Crisis in Iowa City," sponsored by UE-COGS, was attended by over 50 people, both COGS members and members of the larger Iowa City community. Those of us there learned a lot about the severe shortage of child care in Iowa City: one child care worker said that her center's waiting list is over 100 names long, and that there is an even graver shortage of child care that is affordable to low-income people. . . .

The forum was a great start to a community-wide coalition on the child care crisis on the UI campus, and the larger Iowa City community. Graduate employees with children are especially in need of affordable, flexible child care options to carry out our responsibilities as teachers, students, and parents. (Lyn Elliott)

### **March 1999**

#### *New Contract: Celebrate, March Forward!*

Let us sing and rejoice, for we have won a contract! Thanks to the work of over 30 Contract Action Team members, over 40 stewards, dozens of committee members, dozens of rank-and-file members taking part in rallies, and the Bargaining and Grievance Committee, there is plenty to cheer for:

Salaries: Decent increases have been gained: for a half-time returning employee, a \$420 increase the first year, and a \$435 one to enter the 21st century. This represents a 3% yearly increase over the average salary. . . .

The Human Rights Memorandum of Understanding: Thanks to the actions taken over the last two years, the December grade-in, and the importance of such a clause to the membership, we were finally able to push the university to guarantee the union's right to assist with discrimination and harassment complaints.

Health Care: Mental and dental care are now part of our health care package . . . . And, vital to many members, the University will now pay a substantial 70% of the family contribution to the health plan. . . . (Deborah Herman)

### **September 1999**

#### *University Withdraws Claim to Member's Earnings—Arbitration Avoided*

Last spring, COGS' membership voted to authorize the Bargaining and Grievance Committee to begin arbitration proceedings on behalf of one of our members, a research assistant in the Dance Department. The grievance arose when the university sought to collect money paid the employee after he had already completed the duties assigned him . . . .

As the hearing drew near, the union continued to press the university to drop their claim due to the facts of the case. On September 9, the university dropped its claim to the grievant's salary. . . . (Jolene Stritecky)

## October 1999

*An Injury to One is an Injury to All! No More Payroll Snafus!: University must give Payroll & Benefits staff the help they need*

In the past, we could assume that our paychecks, accurate and with proper deductions, would arrive the first of each month. This year for the second straight month scores of TAs and RAs have either not received full payment of their salaries or have had not health insurance deductions made. In addition, more than \$600 in union dues have not been properly made or paid to the union.

. . . the university has been planning a payroll software conversion for at least 2 years . . . the conversion has been mishandled and the problems created for real human beings have in many cases been treated cavalierly by upper administrators.

As a Union, we have done four things in response:

- Via a survey by e-mail, over 150 individuals with payroll problems were identified . . . COGS then set up an emergency network with the Payroll Office and Staff Benefits.
- The union has filed three grievances against the university for failure to meet contractual obligations.
- The union has been in regular contact with the media to shed light on this debacle, so Iowa citizens know how inadequate UI administrators' handling of this problem is.
- Stewards, officers, and Organizing Committee members divided up "Paycheck Problem" responses. Emergency situations received immediate help; all others will be contacted so that they understand the grievance process. . . . (Deborah Herman)

### *Reaching Out: Building Solidarity Across Borders*

As you may recall, during the April 1999 Membership Meeting, members voted to approve a voluntary dues check-off to support the F.A.T. (*Frente Autentico del Trabajo*, or Authentic Workers' Front), an independent union in Mexico. By adding just \$1 per month to your dues, you support F.A.T. organizers in Mexico and contribute to the process of breaking down barriers between unions and across borders . . . .

UE and F.A.T. formed a Strategic Organizing Alliance in an effort to build a new kind of international solidarity. UE and F.A.T. continue to use worker-to-worker exchanges to deepen understanding and promote relationships across borders. These exchanges have demonstrated that the most effective way to educate workers in the United States and Mexico and to motivate them to educate others is through direct contact with each other.

COGS has actively participated in and benefited from worker exchanges. In November 1997, COGS member Mary Crippen traveled to Mexico with a delegation of UE women, and in October 1998, COGS hosted two F.A.T. members. This spring we (tentatively) look forward to the arrival of another F.A.T. delegation.

By supporting F.A.T., you actively contribute to building international solidarity. The global economy has arrived. By establishing strong networks of mutually supportive workers within the global community, we will forge cross-border solidarity. . . . (Yvonne Pitts)



## July 2000

### *It's Time To Organize and Mobilize*

A rank and file union such as UE-COGS is only as strong as its membership base. Not only does our membership vote on issues and carry out the daily operations of the union, but in the past it has been an active, mobilized membership that has gained better wages, benefits, and respect for graduate employees. . . . However, as a graduate employee union, we are in a uniquely challenging position due to the enormous turnover we have in our membership every year at graduation. Therefore, it is essential that we continually organize graduate employees around the university, both attracting members in departments that have not been strongly organized and also continuing to maintain our membership levels in well-organized departments.

As we approach contract negotiations this year, it is more essential than ever that all members take on the role of member/organizer. We must discuss the union with our fellow graduate employees . . . . The vast majority of current graduate employees do not remember what working at the UI was like without a graduate employee's union, or the obstacles faced by our predecessors prior to unionization. . . .

This is a union that is run by its members - and thus we are only as strong as our membership. COGS members are needed to fill many . . . roles this year, such as being a steward, serving on the house visiting team, being active on a committee, or doing the crucial work of helping to organize on the department level . . . (Rob Russell)

## September 2000

### *Delegates Report on National Convention—UE Sets Union Priorities, Endorses Ralph Nader*

When COGS members decided in 1996 to affiliate with UE, the United Electrical, Radio, & Machine Workers of America, they based their choice in part on UE's historical commitment to democratic, rank-and-file unionism. One of the primary ways UE maintains a democratic structure is by involving members from all locals in making decisions and setting union-wide priorities at district and national conventions. Since affiliating with UE, COGS members have actively participated in conventions at both levels. COGS' delegation to the 65th Annual UE National Convention, held August 27-31 in Erie, PA, returned with a heightened sense of how democratic decision-making works on a union-wide basis, and came away convinced that, as delegate Heather Kopelson put it, UE "is a progressive union on the national level as well as the local level."

. . . The resolution that sparked the most active debate at the convention was undoubtedly the recommendation submitted by a Milwaukee UE Local that the convention endorse Ralph Nader's presidential campaign. After three days of deliberation and informal political discussion among themselves, followed by extended debate on the convention floor, delegates passed the resolution . . . . Our delegation to the convention can attest that the process through which the national UE Convention eventually voted to endorse Nader comes as another sign that debate is alive and well in UE and that members are indeed running this union. (Jennifer Sherer)

### *Membership Activism Keeps the Movement Alive*

Since 1996 UE Local 896-COGS has been at the forefront of academic-labor activism at the University of Iowa. Strengthened by a democratic, rank-and-file structure, COGS members have won victories and

protected the rights of TAs and RAs by using both the formal means of negotiation and direct action.

The COGS brand of organizing around issues comes out of COGS' early days. . . . In April 1996 . . . TAs and RAs voted by an overwhelming margin to have UE-COGS represent them. The following fall the first ever COGS-elected bargaining committee started negotiations with the UI. As it became apparent that the UI was intent on not negotiating with COGS, members . . . held the first ever Grade-In. Scores of COGS members sat-in, stood-in, and walked-in at the IMU to deliver the UI a long-awaited report card. Not surprisingly the UI received failing grades for salaries, health insurance, and human rights, among other issues. Forced to recognize that COGS was more than just a bargaining committee and that it was a force of hundreds of TAs and RAs, the University finally started bargaining. . . .

The activism didn't stop there. . . . In departments all over campus, COGS stewards and officers regularly organized members to win grievances. . . .

When bargaining commenced in the Fall of 1998, nearly one hundred COGS members joined the Bargaining and Grievance Committee in delivering the Union's proposals to the UI. . . . The 1998 Grade-In gave the UI incomplete marks for its failure to provide adequate support for child care and its lack of any contribution towards employee health insurance coverage for dependents.

As bargaining moved forward, COGS members regularly accompanied each bargaining session at the IMU with informational picket lines and rallies. Finally, the University met the Union's demands and agreed to pay 70% of the cost for dependent health insurance. . . . Membership activism is the lifeblood of this Union. . . . (Ryan Downing)

## **October 2000**

### *COGS, UI Exchange Proposals: Bargaining for New Contract Begins*

On October 11, COGS' Bargaining and Grievance Committee, along with over 125 COGS members, presented the Union's proposals for the 2001-03 contract to the University/Board of Regents. . . .

At the close of the Union's proposal presentation, UE Field Organizer Ryan Downing stressed that "What is at issue here are the priorities of this University in relation to those employees who log the majority of educational contact hours with undergraduates in classes, labs, discussion sections, and office hours, and who contribute daily to the University's excellence as a research institution." . . .

The University's proposal presented two weeks later on October 25, however, fell far short of recognizing the value of TA and RA labor.

In response to COGS' proposed improvements, the University/Regents proposed to maintain the status quo on most contract items. . . .

"It's apparent to me that we have a lot of work to do in the upcoming negotiations process," said Bargaining Committee member Jen Ryan. "However, as the process unfolds, I am reassured and heartened by the overwhelming support of our members . . ."

UE Field Organizer Ryan Downing echoed these sentiments in his closing remarks to the University/Regents after receiving their proposal. "Unfortunately, there are fundamental philosophical and practical differences between our two proposals," Downing said. "We anticipate a process which will

move all of us forward, not backward. Based on the University's proposal, we have much work to do. But the Union will not rest until this work is done." (Jennifer Sherer)

*Ryan Downing and Jennifer Sherer, University of Iowa*