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UNIVERSITY OF OREGON'S GRADUATE TEACHING FELLOWS

Paul Prew

The Graduate Teaching Fellows Federation (GTFF) is the third oldest graduate employee union in the country. The GTFF represents nearly 1200 graduate employees at the University of Oregon whose duties include teaching, research, and administrative tasks. As a well-established union, the GTFF has had its share of ups and downs in its ability to keep members involved and protect the interests of the graduate employees under its contract. Although the GTFF has a long history and a firm structure to support it, sometimes obstacles arise that threaten the benefits gained over long years of struggle.

In the mid-1990s, the GTFF won health insurance concessions in the form of small contributions. By 1997, the GTFF switched health insurance carriers and increased the level of benefits. The University was now making a full contribution for all employed GTFs during the academic year. The increase in benefits and increased use of the plan led to some very dramatic increases in 1999 and 2000.

In the summer of 1999, a number of large claims and undervalued insurance rates led to a near two-fold increase in insurance rates. The GTFF entered negotiations over the provision of health insurance with what appeared to be an insurmountable increase of 90 percent over the previous year's premium cost. Given the small number of graduate employees on campus during the summer, the strategy focused on tying wages to health insurance. In order to cover the 90 percent increase, the GTFF agreed to a 1.25 percent and a 1 percent wage increase in the coming two years. In addition, the University would not agree to any obligations to pay increases the following year, but demanded that the GTFF limit itself to asking for only the rate increase requested by the insurance carrier (i.e., not asking for increased benefits such as major dental or lower deductibles) for the next two years. The GTFF had little grassroots mobilization or media coverage and was forced to accept the terms with a slight modification allowing the GTFF to ask for more than the increase if the composition of the bargaining unit changed dramatically.

Although the result of negotiations in the summer of 1999 left the GTFF in a poor position to negotiate future insurance agreements, the ratification vote for the insurance agreement was used as an organizing tool in Fall 1999. The issue of insurance was explained to GTFs as an important reason to become a member and vote on the insurance agreement. Membership numbers grew, but more importantly, GTFs were beginning to become interested in the issues that affected them. By the Summer Term 2000, the GTFF had grown dramatically in its ability to utilize university groups, local unions, and political leaders for support in their negotiation's campaign.

Another large insurance premium increase, nearly 60 percent, faced the GTFF negotiating team in the summer of 2000. Sarah Hardgrave took on the position of lead negotiator for the summer insurance negotiations. Sarah had the task of keeping a negotiations team together in the face of possibly losing the 100% employer-paid health insurance. While the negotiating team focused on trying to convince the University that they needed to cover the cost of the increase, the GTFF began a campaign that included rallies, flyers, and outreach to community groups. To put pressure on the University to maintain the level

of benefits given the wage cuts, the GTFF solicited letters from faculty, classified employees, undergraduates and graduate employees to be sent to the Administration. University negotiators mentioned letters on numerous occasions during negotiations. The letters did appear to have a tangible effect on the University negotiation team. In addition, press releases brought attention to the campus at a time it desperately wanted to stay out of the spotlight.

During the early negotiations, the University refused to move considerably. Since the GTFF could not ask for more than the increase proposed by the insurance carrier, the GTFF could not take the typical bargaining position of starting high and working toward a compromise. In effect, the GTFF had to open with its last and final offer. Sarah and the other negotiators faced tense moments as they had to hold their position during these early rounds. At one point, the GTFF probed the University to determine if they would cover a "substantial" amount of the increase if the GTFF would be willing to put a cap on the University's contribution for insurance the next year. The University returned with an offer to increase its contribution 20 percent. Aside from asking the University, "If we did 20 percent of our workload, would that be considered a 'substantial' amount of workload?", the GTFF countered by threatening not to register for "extra" credits. The Oregon University System had recently linked funding to credits, and many departments were not "maxed out" on the number of credits students could be registered. The University would stand to lose \$1,000,000 between their offer and the expected revenue from the extra credits. Due to the pressure, the University began to move, allowing the GTFF to hold out until the last day of negotiations.

On the last day, the GTFF staged a symbolic protest similar to the previous spring occupation of the administration building by undergraduates demanding monitoring of the factories producing university apparel. The protest brought news crews to the campus. While the protest carried on outside, Sarah delivered a presentation to the University negotiators explaining the implications of not acting in the graduate employees' best interest. Sarah brought all of the themes of the negotiations together and tied them to the loss of revenue from graduate students not taking the extra credits. After Sarah's impassioned speech, the protesters outside of the administration building were updated, and a film crew followed negotiators back to the negotiation session. Combined with a news crew filming the meeting, the threat of a "credit strike" brought the negotiations to a quick and desirable outcome for the GTFF. The cost of insurance increased slightly for GTFs during the summer and for GTF families, but the GTFF retained free insurance for GTFs during the academic year. After the negotiations had ended, a Sociology professor commented to the GTFF President that the University "thought they had you." The interest and involvement of GTFs through issue-based organizing, the support of community groups, and the effective use of opportunities to pressure the University all combined for a surprisingly favorable outcome during the summer 2000 negotiations. Sarah Hardgrave, as lead negotiator, played a key role in what would be one of the most successful, come-from-behind, negotiation victories in recent GTFF history.

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GTFF health-insurance anthem by Mark Meritt, sung to the tune of The Beastie Boys' 'Fight for Your Right to Party.'

Fight for Your Right to Health Care

**by Mark Meritt, English steward
(sung to the tune of Fight for Your Right To Party
by the Beastie Boys)**

**I got carpal tunnel hands from typing all last night
But my thesis director says my project's still not right
I work a point five, I get paid a point two
I'm coughing up blood and my kids all got the flu**

**I teach three classes and I do my own work
If I don't grade all the papers, the kids say I'm a jerk
So I stay up three days just to get well read
I'll be teaching my next class from a hospital bed**

**Well now ODS says that our fees are too low
Will the administration help us, or will they say no
Please President Frohnmayr, help keep us alive
Or your school's reputation's gonna take a nose dive**

HEALTHY EMPLOYEES

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HAPPY EMPLOYEES