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GTAC AT KANSAS:

Working it Right in a Right-to-Work State

Robert Vodicka

The Graduate Teaching Assistants Coalition began as a student organization at the University of Kansas (KU) in 1991. After four years of legal battles with the university, we affiliated with AFT. Because the university stalled, it took two more years to ratify the first contract. That contract codified the tuition waiver and granted GTAs at KU the first-ever employer contribution to health insurance premiums. In those first six years, many people contributed mightily just to create the union and then get the first contract done. Because I was not at KU during all of that time, I do not know everyone who worked on these things but I do want to name (with my apologies for misspellings) the ones that I do know—to acknowledge and thank them for the work they did that has improved the teaching conditions for GTAs at KU: Richard Buck, Karen Hellikson, Mark Horowitz, Stephen Mathis, Dan Murtaugh, David Reidy, Laura Senio, and Helen Sheumaker.

By the time of the first contract vote, many of the people in this first group of activists had finished their degrees or finished them shortly thereafter. This left something of a void when I became chair of the communications committee in the fall of 1998 and Ophra Leyser became co-president (with Joy Wrolson) in January of 1999. Furthermore, we had just staved off a backdoor attempt by the state Senate to legislate us out of existence in the spring of 1998. So even those who had the institutional memory felt burned out. On top of that, we experienced a drop in membership and activity that I understand is normal in right-to-work states after a contract ratification. To add sour icing to a bitter cake, we experienced friction with our state association.

Frankly, I feel like we floundered for the first year Ophra and I were leaders. The turning point came when the Association of Graduate Employee Locals (AGEL) sent two organizers to help us in the fall of 1999. I want to name them too because of the crucial advice and encouragement they offered us: Mark Dille (organizer for GEO at the University of Michigan) and Dave Kamper (from the University of Illinois). With their help, we changed our focus to organizing. From that point forward, we considered the organizing implications of everything we did. Ophra grasped the importance of this at least as early as I did in the process if not before. Along with Ophra and me, two other people were crucial at this time: Amy Cummins (our current president) and Greg Douros (our current organizing chair). The four of us shifted GTAC's focus to organizing every week, talking to as many GTAs as we could about the union. We then trained people who showed interest in the union so that they could organize as well. As a result of this change in strategy, we came close to doubling our membership between the fall of 1999 and the next spring. At the same time we made great strides in repairing our relationship with the state association.

Since the fall of 1999, GTAC has grown much stronger. Ophra and I have now had countless conversations about GTAC. Her insights have been crucial in planning the direction of the union. She has been a valuable and trusted advisor, and my respect for her has grown continually. For the last year, Ophra and I have been working on the negotiations for the second contract with the university. Talks began in

September with me as the leader and Ophra on the team. I have taken the primary role in this area but could not have done so without knowing that Ophra would advise and support me as well take care of other important union business. In discussing strategy, she is usually the first one to get us to think about the organizing implications of our positions. This has been crucial to the course we have taken. As with the first contract talks, the university has stalled. It took about nine months to complete the first contract from scratch. Nine months of negotiating our second contract have passed, and we've only discussed one-third of the articles in the contract. Our primary goals have been to improve salaries and benefits for graduate teachers at KU, but, as the pace of the talks indicates, the university has not been accommodating.

However, our organizing efforts have continued and are showing dividends. We held a rally in April of 2001 to protest the stalling from KU and to dramatize the poor current working conditions that we seek to improve. Local media gave it a great deal of coverage, projecting the strength of the union. The spotlight was shown on several people that day, but I see the roots of it in the commitment we made in the fall of 1999 to turn around the union. At this point, KU seems to have given up trying to threaten us every time the press covers the union because we have never backed down. Every time we stand up for ourselves, we grow stronger and more able to do it again. I re-emphasize that our ability to do this grew under Ophra's leadership. While I cannot predict what will happen with the contract negotiations, I am optimistic that we will win significant gains in areas important to us. Most of all, I am confident that whatever happens, our continued organizing efforts will make us strong enough to withstand whatever the university throws at us.

Finally, both Ophra and I remain conscious of the drop-off in membership and activity after the first contract. We have been doing everything we can to prevent that from happening this time around. Again, this grows out of organizing efforts. We identify potential leaders and get them to commit to increasing levels of involvement in the union. I feel confident that this process will leave GTAC stronger than ever after the negotiations conclude and after both Ophra and I leave KU.

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