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UNION ORGANIZING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

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Organizing graduate student employees at the University of California was an 18-year effort crowned finally with surprising and complete success. Though I cannot write authoritatively about the work of all those years or about the effort made on the other eight UC campuses or on the system-wide level, I think I can offer some insights into the lot of an ordinary graduate student employee, me, who got caught up in the effort to organize 10,000 workers toiling for the largest single employer in the largest state in the country.

I returned to graduate school at the age of 45 after a first career in the non-academic world. As I worked on an MFA at the University of New Orleans I watched the progress of graduate student organizing at several Eastern campuses with interest. Unions were nothing new to my experience, but every time I raised the issue in Louisiana, students and faculty looked at me blankly. Why would graduate students need or want a union? Insecure appointments, inadequate offices, lack of training or logistical support, were all problems students accepted for the honor, and small remittance, of employment. When I moved to the Ph.D. program in the Department of Dramatic Art at the University of California, Santa Barbara in 1998, I marveled at the palm trees, nearby ocean swells, and temperate climate that seemed to match a more liberal political climate than I had known in Louisiana. Students were already organizing, marching, and picketing for union recognition. They were doing things I had only thought about. Now I could join a movement rather than try to start one.

I marched with fellow students and in June of 1999 cast my ballot in an election that finally certified 'Associated Student Graduate Employees/United Auto Workers' as the official representatives on our campus, just as it did on very other campus in the UC system. That very night I attended a campus-wide meeting and voted to elect eight graduate students to our local bargaining unit to work on our first-ever contract. Following these two votes, I contentedly returned to my studies believing that my union work, limited as it had been, was over and that more experienced students would now see the process through to its conclusion.

Five months later, however, our campus-wide elected bargaining unit quit en masse to protest, in their thinking, the manipulative and undemocratic methods of the UAW. That they resigned by e-mail and never called a meeting of the people who had elected them, undercut, to my mind, their commitment to democracy. Fearing that the loss of a bargaining unit would inhibit our ability to negotiate our first contract, I contacted the UAW to see what I could do to help. Against my better judgment, I allowed myself to be recruited to serve on a new bargaining committee made up of three UCSB students.

We had to contend not only with the disgruntled members of the former bargaining team, who quickly denounced us, but also with the vociferous tactics of a small group of extremists who styled themselves 'United Student Labor' and thought that only a single campus-based organization, separate from the system-wide structure that had been set up, could guarantee 'union democracy,' as opposed to the 'business

unionism' they identified with the UAW. Personally, I thought issues of 'democracy' (and just which of us was against democracy?) and local organization had to wait until we had our first contract. According to labor studies, 40 percent of new unions never survive to negotiate their first contract, and I didn't want to see my first graduate student employee union die a premature death.

Unfortunately, those who had resigned and those who had opted out of the AGSE/UAW earlier were not above personal attack and physical intimidation to win their version of 'democracy.' The result was that the other two members of our local bargaining team soon dropped out and I found myself the only student facing faculty and administrators in local bargaining sessions. This endeared me neither to them, to students taken in by the vituperative rants of the 'dissidents' nor to the faculty I had to work with while earning my degree. The negotiating process dragged on for nine months as the University, with its one billion dollars in investments, haggled over items such as extending free summer bus passes—already given to summer school attendees—to the Teaching Assistants who taught these summer classes. Finally in June 2000, after one-day walkouts, the threat of more strikes, and the arm-twisting of Democrats in the state legislative leadership, the UC and AGSE/UAW agreed upon a contract.

Though passed by 90 percent positive vote margins on every other campus, we struggled and managed to reach the two-thirds majority necessary to pass the contract at Santa Barbara as well.

As the newly-minted union prepared for state elections, I resisted all efforts to recruit me to run for state and campus offices. I wanted to get back to my classes and work on my dissertation and leave the union work to others. I report here only from the viewpoint of one individual who got caught up in a statewide process of union organizing for ten thousand employees. I was not a leader or even a major contributor to this historic effort. Rather, I think my experience can only be important to illustrate how each one of us, singly and often isolated, can multiply our influence and efforts through the solidarity of the union for the benefit of all.

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