



Bryant, T. (2001). UE-COTS at the University of Iowa. *Workplace*, 7, 165-167.

UE-COGS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

Tim Bryant

1997 was the Year of the Contract at the University of Iowa. COGS, the Campaign to Organize Graduate Students, had won its recognition vote just the year before and finished negotiating its first labor agreement with the University the following spring. Thanks to the 949 graduate students who voted yes to bring in the union, graduate students returning in the fall would be met by benefits not seen before, such as a uniform pay scale across university departments and a comprehensive healthcare plan available to all graduate students. Thanks to COGS's ten-member negotiating committee, including two representatives from our affiliated national union, United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE), graduate employees were now protected by union representation and a workplace grievance procedure. Thanks to the efforts of hundreds of COGS activists, graduate employees now had a democratically-run union that was their voice, a collective voice to raise issues and make decisions together about the union's priorities, a unified voice with which to challenge unfair policies and practices. Jennifer Ryan came to the University of Iowa in 1997. The story of COGS is also her story. Jennifer's increasing involvement in COGS—from rank-and-file member to union steward and member of the union's negotiating committee—draws a comprehensive picture of the union's many struggles and successes over the past five years, during the first two contracts, to the making of our third contract, which takes effect July 1, 2001.

Enjoying the success of their first contract negotiations, COGS members spent the fall of 1997 recruiting new members from the entering class and educating all graduate students about their newly-won protections and employee benefits. At the first annual meeting of graduate students in the English Department, Jennifer joined the union along with many of her new colleagues, both new and returning students. Teaching and Research Assistants like Jennifer signed up for UIGradcare, the first comprehensive healthcare plan available to all UI graduate students, with employer contributions covering 90% of costs for graduate employees. COGS members who had been active in the long fight to organize, reaching as far back as COGS's first attempt to unionize in 1993, informed their new classmates on the pre-history of the union—the fight against unfair working conditions and substandard wages—and the protections against such practices in the new contract's grievance procedure. In meetings like this one across campus, graduate employees organized and educated classmates in their own departments to change the way graduate students would think of themselves and their position in the University, as students, workers, and members of a strong union whose voice of advocacy would be made up of their voices.

The following year, her fellow Graduate Instructors in the Rhetoric Department elected Jennifer to be one of the department's union stewards. As a departmental steward, Jennifer organized informational meetings, rallies, and other campus-wide events. She participated in a weekly picket on childcare, one of the union's many long-standing concerns that university officials had refused to discuss at the negotiation table, due to its nature as a permissive topic of bargaining. In a right-to-work state, where represented employees are not required to join their union, over 700 COGS members organized and educated a 2,600 member bargaining unit in order to build upon the benefits and protections established by their first contract. As

the seven-member Bargaining Committee negotiated the second contract, the Union's general membership organized around its central issues. Thanks to an organized and energized membership, the union won key victories by the end of negotiations, chief among them the additions of comprehensive dental and mental health coverage, and language in the contract protecting against workplace discrimination. Other COGS priorities that the University refused to negotiate, including extended childcare coverage and universal tuition waivers, were left for the next round of member activism and organizing in preparation for the next contract.

When the second contract took effect in the summer of 1999, Jennifer's commitment to COGS had substantially increased. Having attended her first meeting of UE's District 11 Council in February of that year, she was gaining familiarity with the national union's mission of rank-and-file unionism. Members of fellow UE locals from across the Midwest described their efforts to organize around issues like safe working conditions and fair treatment. Shop reports from fellow UE stewards described how they successfully defended jobs and workers' rights through grievance meetings and effective organizing. Officers at both the national and local levels repeatedly emphasized two of our union's central mottoes: "Organize, Organize, Organize" and "The Members Run This Union." With an interest in taking greater part in the local union, Jennifer ran for office and was elected as one of COGS's five Chief Stewards for 1999-2000.

As Chief Steward of the Blue Area, comprised of several humanities departments on campus, Jennifer continued her organizing work and took on new responsibilities as an advocate for graduate employees' rights in several grievance investigations. Before the school year started, she helped organize the summer Stewards Picnic and started preparing the program of stewards' training in the fall. Having attended Stewards Council since August, 1998, Jennifer was familiar with the monthly meetings at which stewards from across campus shared workplace issues, grievances, and victories, and trained each other in how best to represent their co-workers. Jennifer had a direct hand in securing many of these victories for graduate employees by representing them at grievance meetings with University officials. In some cases, employees unfairly dismissed from their assistantships were reimbursed for lost pay and were reinstated to their jobs. In other cases, Jennifer defended her co-workers' rights for paid leave due to medical reasons. As a Chief Steward, Jennifer also researched issues affecting the entire bargaining unit, such as a new payroll database implemented by the University and its potential impact on the COGS bargaining unit. As she finished her second year as a Graduate Instructor in Rhetoric, Jennifer practiced the art of effective and purposeful communication to the benefit of her undergraduate students and her graduate student colleagues.

In spring of 2000, Jennifer was elected Blue Area Chief Steward for a second year. While she continued the work of the past year, the emphasis of her efforts in the coming year would be on negotiating the Union's third contract. That summer, she and the other members of the Bargaining and Grievance Committee trained with UE Field Organizer Ryan Downing on methods of effective communication at the negotiating table and with the general membership of the union concerning bargaining priorities and possibilities throughout the roughly six-month long negotiation process. The committee brought to the table many of COGS's past priorities: stronger non-discrimination language in the contract, tuition waivers, and childcare coverage. In addition to general committee and organizing work, Jennifer specifically researched childcare coverage, tuition waivers, and non-discrimination protection for graduate employees and unions at peer institutions in the Big Ten. She also made a presentation in support of the automatic enrollment of international students in the UIGradcare health plan, which covers immunizations required by the University, but not covered by its other student health insurance plan.

Tuition waivers were also on the table during negotiations. The previous year of member activism and lobbying for tuition waivers in the state capitol encouraged the University's committee to discuss this permissive topic during several months of negotiations, a vast improvement from the last negotiations, when the subject barely made it across the table. The Union pushed for an equitable plan, the cost of

whose implementation would be shared by both the University and the Union. However, when the University refused to agree on a plan in which graduate employees would bear 70% of the cost, our committee negotiated a final contract proposal that did not include tuition waivers. While significant improvements in the coming contract include 4% wage increases per year and employer contributions to healthcare coverage of same-sex domestic partners, permissive topics like tuition waivers, childcare coverage, and non-discrimination protection remain unifying priorities for our union's daily organizing efforts and the next round of contract negotiations.

Jennifer Ryan has shared the experiences of her fellow COGS members as both a graduate student and employee. In addition to her union service during these years, she has worked as a Research Assistant in the English Department and the UI Labor Center, as a Graduate Instructor in the Rhetoric Department, the Writing Lab, and the English Department, as well as volunteering at the UI Hospitals and Clinics as a children's tutor. While fulfilling all of her work responsibilities, she has progressed in the English Department PhD program to the comprehensive exam, which she plans to take in late April this year. The emphasis of her studies is jazz poetics, taken as the many fusions of rhetorical, artistic, and political expression in African-American literature, music, and culture. In her studies, work, and activism, Jennifer's contributions to her union and university attest to the strength that many fusions lend to the voice of a committed teacher and scholar.

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