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## LEARNING TO BE LABOR

Given the state of American labor, organizing a union necessarily entails explaining—over and over again—just what a union is. Especially in the academy, this task never ends. Most new education workers require at least some education in labor, and each class of incoming graduate employees needs to be educated at the most basic of levels. Indeed, such education must happen at every level of a campaign and in every bargaining unit. To cite just one example, grad union activists must walk each generation of student newspaper reporters through the most elementary dimensions of a labor world view: for instance, why workers have rights at all and how they came to enjoy the few they possess. The sheer magnitude of ignorance across all populations is both astonishing and—strangely—hopeful. For if ignorance is one of the great barriers to organizing and maintaining unions of education workers, it is also a barrier that may be overcome through education. And when those providing such education are themselves teachers, the prospect of success becomes more encouraging yet. Because the inherent overlap between teaching and organizing is often overlooked, prospective academic activists need to be reminded of just how much they already know about moving people to action.<sup>1</sup>

In the case of the Graduate Employees' Organization, IFT-AFT/AFL-CIO, at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign (GEO2), such a laborite understanding needed to evolve from within. Even as the organization would ultimately educate new members and nascent journalists, they first needed to educate themselves—to organize not the more than five thousand grad employees they hoped to represent, but the one percent of that total who would become the core organizers. That process occurred over a period of two years, starting from the earliest discussions within the English Department during the fall of 1993 and culminating in the agreement to affiliate with the Illinois Federation of Teachers (IFT) in the spring of 1995. Thus, it took as long to become a viable organization as it would to run a card drive and win an election. Given that the founders knew they wanted to unionize from the beginning, why did they need four years to secure their unit's endorsement—or even three, if you count the card drive's results as an equally valid index of approval? Why couldn't the GEO have accomplished the same goals in its first two years?

The short answer is they needed to learn *how* to be a union before they could function *as* one. In the two years they grew from ten members to five hundred, this was the lesson they practiced. Without that slow development, they might never have succeeded in their card drive, won their election, endured a lengthy legal war, and ultimately secured representation rights and begun bargaining.<sup>3</sup> What the union learned in those two years was discipline and cohesiveness. They learned how to work together, and that such collaboration requires patience, listening, diligence, and tenacity. They learned how to be a union, so that when the time came, an international would affiliate with them, a bargaining unit would endorse them, and

that unit would cohere across the ongoing organizing drives, public demonstrations, legal struggles, and job actions required to secure collective bargaining rights.

Before all that became possible, though, the GEO held its initial campus-wide meetings and, as a result of such events, learned how to run meetings. They staged their first rallies, and through these and other mechanisms, learned how to achieve a public presence. They gathered issues and refined their message, thereby learning to be a truly representative body. They encountered resistance, and came to better appreciate the magnitude of the task that faced them. They debated constitutional questions and experimented with different schemes of organization, sometimes bogging down in needless detail, but always learning how to shape the union to the goals its members sought. They networked with other grad employee unions and drew inspiration from a climate of activism stretching from New Haven to Berkeley—centered, perhaps, on nearby Decatur, site of three of the 1990s' bitterest labor struggles.<sup>4</sup> And throughout, they retained the professional focus that inspired their origin. Although the GEO always campaigned around specific issues, their emphases remained the right of and need for representation: the recognition of academic work *as* work, regardless of one's job title, and the responsibility of academic workers to fix a system that was failing them.

By the end of 1993, the early unionists at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) made their first definite steps toward a campus-wide movement. The earliest mailing list for the GEO—and perhaps the first document to assign that title to the group—shows twenty-six names. Joining English among the disciplines represented are History, Anthropology, German, and Comparative Literature. Two participants list their department as Housing, meaning this was their employing unit, but in fact they represented additional academic units, Music and Computer Science. A third individual, Bob Naiman, was employed by the University YMCA, a center for local activism. It was Naiman who linked the previous incarnation of the Graduate Employees' Organization to this recent successor, and who arranged for the new GEO to assume a desk in the Y's Student Program Offices.<sup>5</sup>

The decision to formally become the GEO took place at a meeting in the English Building near the end of 1993. It was at this point that the union also adopted its first organizational structure, subdividing into the following committees: "Finances, Events, Membership, Publicity, Constitution, Affiliation, and Issues Research."<sup>6</sup> Over time, the names and responsibilities of these groups would change. Finances would mutate into a formal officer position as treasurer, first announced in the draft constitution of January 1994. Events and Publicity would survive first as ad hoc groupings, though in time, each would also evolve officer positions: Events Coordinator and Press Secretary, respectively. Membership and Issues Research would ultimately fall under the purview of the Organizing Committee, defined in the GEO's initial draft constitution, but not a proper entity until the fall of 1994. And Affiliation would disband once the decision to affiliate with the IFT was finalized in the spring of 1995. Nevertheless, despite these changes—and even though a union of two dozen members would be hard-pressed to support the work of seven committees—it was clear from the moment of incorporation what the GEO needed to accomplish. They needed money and visibility and more members; they needed to define their structure and the issues around which they would organize; and they needed to affiliate.

But knowing they needed to accomplish such goals was quite different from knowing how to do so. They would need members to affiliate, because internationals were reluctant to endorse a campaign with such limited demonstrable support. Affiliation was also the key to funding; in the meantime, they had to make do with what they could garner as a registered student organization—and securing such status was another early step of the GEO. Publicizing the right issues and staging successful events helped attract new members, but prospective members also had to be polled for issues and recruited to events. And somehow, all of these things had to happen as the organization defined itself on the fly, reconstituting the GEO in fits and starts as new voices entered the fray and new issues—external and internal—emerged. No wonder, given these congeries of responsibilities both intersecting and conflicting with one another, that it would take two years for the GEO to first affiliate and then mount a card drive.

As the union grew to become a campus-wide movement, it continued to derive energy from its origin in the English Department. One month before the union's first general meeting, the English Graduate Student Association (EGSA), whose officers initiated the union effort, sponsored a "forum on the financial crisis within the department and the profession as a whole" ("English Graduate Students"). The meeting was rife with the same angst that had colored department grad student life throughout the 1990s—and stimulated the drive to unionize. The department was struggling to meet teaching needs and support its Ph.D.s while also reducing admissions to the grad program—this last as an effort to address the job crisis by paring UIUC's share of "surplus" applicants to the profession. The discussion at the forum ranged across a number of topics. Some participants argued for a redefinition of the field that would acknowledge the public and political dimensions of English studies. If, according to this viewpoint, English truly were under attack—and the mood of the department's grads qualified as something like a siege mentality—then it needed to learn to defend itself and articulate its concerns within a larger debate about work, education, and the communities encompassed by these. Others focused more locally on the department's own solutions, objecting to, among other things, the failure to adequately inform grads about their meager job prospects; the ambiguity of departmental postdoctoral positions; the unethical nature of using such positions to staff classes that ought to be covered by tenure-line appointments; the inadequate compensation for teaching assistants; and the overall indifference of a faculty that directly benefited from the grad program—grads made seminars possible and released faculty from lower-level teaching—but did little to educate Ph.D. candidates about the nature of their profession.

If by the end of the decade the department had progressed on some of these fronts, the larger issues continued to bedevil them. On the one hand, employment issues of all kinds were more openly discussed; postdoctoral appointments were more clearly handled; and compensation for all non-tenure-line categories had improved considerably. On the other, the department grew more and more dependent on the adjunct labor it first expanded as a way both of compensating for lower admissions and protecting recent Ph.D.s. At the January 1994 forum, one participant objected to the prospect of postdocs teaching two hundred-level courses, but within a few years, such instructors were routinely teaching at the three hundred-level, and on at least one occasion, a postdoc taught a seminar in pedagogy for new instructors of professional writing. To an extent, these difficulties merely highlight the widely acknowledged truth that English departments comprise the leading edge of cheap labor trends in the academy. Like such departments elsewhere, UIUC's English program bears a massive teaching responsibility to the rest of the campus in the form of composition and general education literature courses. Staffing these courses means hiring large numbers of non-tenure-line teachers, and no purely intradepartmental reform solves the basic dilemma of this compromise. Either one lowers admissions to the grad program and compensates for the consequent shortage of teachers by extending the appointments of those already in the pipeline—i.e. postdocs and other adjuncts—or one bases admissions on teaching needs and expels teachers as soon as they have used up their "student" eligibility (in most cases, after six or seven years). Absent departmental resolve to simply refuse to go along with this regime—and such a proposal was never publicly entertained in the decade of the 1990s—the alternatives always involved actively harming some population, and the moral calculus engendered by this arrangement led to Jesuitical arguments over who deserved more charity—prospective grads or recent ABD/Ph.D.s—and exactly how much charity was defensible in either instance.

In terms of the union's history, such relatively local musings remain important because they speak to a fundamental divide in how activists understood their purpose. Unionizing was always both a gesture toward general professional reform and a mechanism for local redress. The latter is easy to spot in the union's early public documents. The "Preamble" to the "Proposed Constitution of the GEO," for example, also drafted in January of 1994, recognized the very local concerns of those for whom it intended to speak:

There are approximately 10,000 graduate students at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, the overwhelming majority of whom will at some point work for the

University. We teach many of the core, first-year undergraduate courses, we conduct research in the University's labs, we work in a wide variety of University offices; in short, we provide crucial support for faculty, undergraduate students, and administrators. Our labor is integral to [the] mission of the University and yet, because we are at the bottom of an immense bureaucracy, we find ourselves without a voice in the decisions which effect [sic] our everyday lives. The Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO) is a grass-roots movement dedicated to putting graduate employees' voices into the University's decision-making process by gaining collective bargaining rights. A strong employees' organization will improve the lives of all graduate students and make this University a better place to work, live and study. ("GEO: Proposed Constitution," 1)

Similarly, a letter inviting grads to a February 28 meeting identified as union goals the following items: "better health care," "dental care," "child care," "increase in base salaries," "elimination of excessive workloads," a "clearly defined grievance procedure," and "job security" ("Fellow Graduate Assistants"). Both the letter and a flyer used to advertise the meeting connected achievement of such benefits to the larger goal of unionizing. "TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE?" asked the flyer, after listing some of the benefits mentioned in the letter.

Not for other state schools like Michigan, Rutgers, UC Berkeley, and Wisconsin, to name a few.

WHAT DO THEY HAVE THAT WE DON'T?

A Graduate Employees Union! ("GRADUATE STUDENTS!")

Here one begins to see the connection between local concerns and a larger, national phenomenon. Since the benefits being sought were difficult to disagree with, the burden entailed making them seem achievable. In part this was accomplished by identifying other campuses where such benefits had been won. And merely by mentioning the existence of other unionized graduate employees, the GEO cultivated the impression of a genuine movement. They were not asking grads at UIUC to be pioneers; they were soliciting them to participate in a solution that had been successfully employed elsewhere. (The other issue of achievability involved cost, and here the letter was clear in expressing a pledge that would continue in union propaganda for years to come—because it speaks to a widespread fear among grads: "We will categorically reject any offer from the University that will lower any graduate assistant's stipend" ["Fellow Graduate Assistants"].)

A letter distributed within the English Department, also advertising the February meeting, more forcefully highlighted the tension between immediate concerns and the larger forces that produced them. Despite efforts by both the department and college to address grad employment issues, "both while we are here and when we enter the job market," the letter argued, "we are still being forced to solve these global issues locally, and with insufficient resources." "Unionization," it went on, "may be one way to see our problem globally, yet focus on practical political objectives." Specifically, the letter mentioned the possibility of the union bargaining directly with "the university administration and the state legislature." "A reallocation of resources at these levels," it argued, "is not an unattainable goal, but something we can begin to seriously initiate through unionization." The letter operates across at least three scenes of action: the personal experiences of grad employees within a single department; the collective power of all such employees, expressed at the institutional and state levels; and the broader environment of what it variously refers to as "the profession as a whole," "the job market," areas "beyond [the] department," and "the academic community." The tensions revealed among the interplay of these scenes, while perhaps always most visible within a department such as English, animated the GEO's campaign from the start. If as the departmental letter regarding the January forum acknowledged, some suggestions for local reform "were criticized . . . as too idealistic or impractical" ("English Graduate Students"), it is nonetheless true that idealism and impracticality helped form the foundation of much the union would attempt.

Yet even the most immediate acts had their impractical dimensions. Although that February 28 meeting—the GEO’s first campus-wide event—came off smoothly, the union would struggle for much of its history with the format of such gatherings. Planning notes for the first meeting disclose some of what made these gatherings so tricky. The meeting was to begin with some general background—on the old GEO, the new GEO, and other union efforts across the country. The next segment was devoted to small group discussions. The purpose of this activity was to generate lists of concerns, which, after being consolidated, could then be ranked by the entire group. In theory, the exercise was intended to demonstrate the union’s responsiveness; in practice—and in part because each of the small groups was facilitated by someone who was “already hooked into GEO [preferably a committee member]”<sup>7</sup>—it served to recapitulate the union’s stated aims. No doubt this congruence was meaningful—grad unions nationwide organize around similar issues, and early GEO activists were aware of both what was frustrating peers at Illinois and what those unions elsewhere were addressing. Still, an activity that serves simply to ratify preordained decisions communicates a veneer of democracy rather than true deliberation. The GEO would continue to be vexed by this dilemma: Were general meetings deliberative or informative? As the union grew and opportunities for participation increased, it would become easier for new and prospective members to involve themselves in decision-making processes. But at least for the first few years, general meetings continued to be dogged by accusations of autocracy. Even after the affiliation, the card drive, and the initial election victory, it was easy for those whose involvement consisted primarily of general meetings to feel as though they were being steamrolled—that the important decisions had been made before the large group was convened. Learning how to allay such fears and to run meetings that both solicited input and imparted necessary information remained one of the key internal challenges the GEO faced in its early years.

If the issue-generating exercise at that first meeting proved superfluous, the general discussion that followed did deepen the debate. Responding to a question about how much power a grad union might have, several participants identified two key ways the GEO could aid its members, even should the union fail to immediately secure those benefits likely to cost the most money. They “argued that organizing [might] enable [GEO] to get non-monetary goals accomplished more quickly, especially grievance procedures.” Indeed, this willingness to acknowledge the purely *professional* concerns of collective bargaining marks the grad union movement as a whole—while opponents are quick to assume unionizing is always about getting more money, academic unions routinely understand their mission to reflect what early GEO activists meant by “more public visibility and perhaps more state recognition for the work we do.” Money is important, but so is respect, and what UIUC unionists realized early on was that neither their employer nor the public at large respected the work they did. And if, in the interim, respect from the outside eluded the union, they were always free to cultivate it among themselves. This was the second means of nonmonetary aid: using the GEO as a networking system or co-op for issues like childcare. While it would be wrong to suggest the union has ever entirely succeeded in such aims, it remains important to recognize this ambition in its earliest instances. The GEO always retained a penchant for what one might term practical idealism: solving real, definable problems—who can watch my kid while I go to the library?—with somewhat wishful reforms: a responsive, community-oriented assortment of my academic peers, that’s who!

The February meeting was the first occasion when the range of that peer group extended to grads from the hard sciences and engineering. According to the minutes of the meeting,

A speech-comm [sic] graduate student asked the science students what their complaints were. Several physics and chemistry students said that health care was the most important issue to them, although they realized they were treated well in other areas. A physics student urged the GEO to focus on “safe” issues like health care and grievance procedures, and to let graduate students enlist support for unionization within their own departments.<sup>8</sup>

That support for the union would divide across disciplinary lines was an unfortunate trend which lasted through the election and beyond. “The high population of international students on this campus was [also]

a major concern—some participants thought that they would be unsupportive because of fear of reprisal.”<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, international students were concentrated among the sciences and engineering, which only added to the difficulty of organizing those sections of campus. The union may have been encouraged by the convergence of their stated goals and those expressed by attendees, but they were also getting their first real taste of what it would mean to take their message out of the humanities ghetto, where different indices of professional self-definition—am I being paid to write my dissertation, or to cheaply replace a tenure-line position? am I training for a lucrative private sector job, or for the mere chance for an academic position?—as well as even more basic factors such as citizenship status inflected one’s attitude toward the hard work and lasting impact of unionization.

But at this point, with little sense of what that work actually entailed, the union knew only that something had to be done. “Things to Look Forward To,” the fourth point of the meeting’s planning agenda, included a catchall of possible actions. To its credit, even by its first general meeting, the union realized it “must leave people with a sense that something more than just organizational meetings [are] happening, i.e., we must leave them with a sense of something to do.”<sup>10</sup> The list of possibilities ranged from voting for a student government party, Free Delivery, that would better advance grad issues at that level, to turning out for a rally on behalf of locked out workers at A.E. Staley in Decatur. The ideas for actual union organizing were more tentatively expressed. The union hoped to hold an outdoor rally that spring; it hoped to get its message out through distributing flyers, engaging in casual conversation, and perhaps staffing an information table at the student union; and it intended to generate its inaugural newsletter by the end of the semester. While the planning notes to the meeting had mentioned “[l]ooking forward to fall card drive?”<sup>11</sup>, that now seemed like a more remote goal. The GEO had proved it could double its turnout for an event, and it had staged its first general meeting effectively. Before they could mount a serious campaign, though, these early unionists needed to prove—to themselves most importantly—they could maintain and build momentum, as well as create the critical mass of support that would carry them through to a victory.

In those early days, though, small things counted for a lot. One founding member identifies among her earliest memories of the campaign “having established something with the Y. . . . [A] desk or something somewhat tangible representing what would be the start of the union. So we had a sort of physical space established.”<sup>12</sup> Initially, that space largely furnished an opportunity simply for discussion. As one graduate employee from History put it, “[R]ight at the beginning I’m not so sure we had a very clear idea of what we were doing. . . . [F]or the most part, it was this small group of individuals who came together and talked about what should be done, and what kind of issue would be important, and what was going on in their departments. And I don’t recall doing a lot of things, actually.” (That member dated his greater investment from two events: working on the union’s first brochure and speaking out at a meeting against sexist remarks other members had been making.) Other early activists concurred with the impression that little was being accomplished. Another member, also from History, “remember[s] there just being a lot of talking, and not a lot of really knowing where to take it at first.” A colleague from elsewhere in the humanities remembered being “tired of sitting in meetings for three hours, and just talking about ideas.” She went on to say,

It can be exciting, but when you’re trying to do political work, you really have to be focused on channeling your energies. So in that sense . . . I sort of lacked patience with the personality struggles that I saw early on . . . . I think it’s sort of the way grad unions start out. But getting a more formalized structure—[a] clear sense of what roles are within the union—helps new people come into the union.

Another founding member, pointing to that same moment, captures the effect of the original enthusiasm that animated some activists. “I remember getting us space at the University YMCA,” she said,

where we were in the Student Activities Office . . . and there was a group of us that just met weekly . . . and we would just talk about what we needed to do: we did petitions, we started a database,<sup>13</sup> but for a long time, it was very much kind of ruled by the people who want[ed] to do the work, and I was one of those people who was willing to be there,<sup>14</sup> and talk about it, and think about things to do, so I don't remember much of getting involved—I just remember *being* involved, and not being able to get out.

Indeed, it is often that inherently collaborative nature of union work that both seduces activists and cements a campaign. Isolated as they can be in discrete academic units, and focused as they are on individual career paths which—in a climate that renders all achievement (conference acceptance, publication, jobs) competitive—unions are often the one opportunity graduate employees have to be professionally collaborative and creatively disinterested.

In March 1994, the union proposed its first set of bylaws. In addition to refining several of the issues introduced by the draft constitution—the name of the organization, its objectives, and definitions of membership—these bylaws also included guidelines for the Steering Committee, which was the principal governing agency of the union at that time. These rules covered such areas as format, directions for minutes, attendance policies, and procedures for running their meetings. While some of these last were innocuous—e.g. rules for closing a discussion—others pointed toward the increasing internal volatility of an organization driven by strong personalities and faced with a monumental task. Point six of the Steering Committee Guidelines, “Dealing with inter-personal antagonisms,” reminds the group that

the goal of the GEO is to organize a union. Members of the SC [i.e. Steering Committee] especially must be conscious of how their comments and actions represent the GEO to the public, and how their comments and actions effect [sic] the goals of the organization. (“GEO By-laws,” 2).

The document then lays out a procedure for resolving “potential antagonisms on the SC,” saying first that these matters be handled privately, with a formal response to follow if necessary, at which stage no names were to be used. “Instead,” the bylaws state, “discussion should focus on behavior, why it is offensive to people, and how to be aware of and avoid such behavior” (“GEO By-laws,” 2).

Given the inevitable stresses entailed by a purely voluntary effort engaged in what even then was a publicly confrontational campaign, it should come as no surprise that some of the early group's conflicted energies expressed themselves in the Steering Committee. Now almost a year old (in academic terms), but still lacking a clear sense of direction, the union was struggling to manage both internal and external dynamics—its members learning together what it meant to plan, coordinate, and execute a massive effort in organizing. While the most important aspects of that effort are the external outcomes—affiliation, running a card drive, winning an election, maintaining pressure and cohesion after that election—the ability to achieve such outcomes depended upon sound *internal* mechanisms. In March 1994, the GEO was still learning how to balance and synthesize its internal workings. Any union created from scratch experiences similar growing pains. And if the progress that spring was not as dramatic as the union might have hoped, the group did continue to grow, just as they continued to develop internally in ways that would facilitate even greater external expansion.

The union staged no rallies in the spring semester, but they did generate their first newsletter, and they did hold another campus-wide meeting, both in May. The newsletter, a double-sided, standard-sized sheet, advertised the meeting and repeated many of the union's basic claims. It identified the population of employees it hoped to represent and described why they ought to think of themselves as employees. It compared the wages and benefits of assistants at Illinois to those at other Big Ten schools, pointing out that while Illinois had the lowest compensation, the schools at the top end were the (then) two unionized campuses, Wisconsin and Michigan. It also compared the health benefits at Illinois to those available at

unionized schools. The newsletter listed other goals of unionization, and closed with a call to “Help GEO Organize this Summer”:

GEO is planning a campus-wide membership drive for the fall semester, and our goal is to get 500 active members by December. With this membership we can vote on affiliation with the union of our choice. Getting our message out to all academic and administrative departments where Grad. Employees work will be crucial to reaching our goal. Over the summer we need volunteers to contact academic departments, to do research on working conditions, prepare a mass mailing, and to help with planning. Any amount of time you can contribute will help the cause of Graduate Employees, and we're darn nice people, too. (“GEO News-Bulletin,” 2)

This newsletter was the first widely distributed document produced by the union. The February meeting had drawn beyond the original humanities base of the movement, but as they prepared for a goal of five hundred members by the end of the year, the GEO reached out to all corners of the campus: Statistics, Math, Psychology, Social Work, Urban Planning, Business Administration, Agricultural Education, Landscape Architecture, Agricultural Economics, Animal Sciences, Metallurgy and Mining, and others. In most cases, early organizers were visiting the buildings that housed these programs' administrative offices and either stuffing grad mailboxes themselves, or, when these boxes weren't accessible, leaving copies to be distributed. On a more limited basis, departments with active members were being informally organized through direct, face-to-face contact, but the kind of systematic, comprehensive, and recursive approach the union would utilize in the card drive and after was both conceptually and practically beyond them at this point.

Inevitably, the union learned through two methods: trial and error and advice from other unions. If the latter was proven and more pointed, the former was nonetheless essential for what it taught early activists about the specifics of their environment—basic facts, plus resources and impediments. These are lessons best learned on the ground, and if the local knowledge is more labor-intensive than the folk wisdom of organizing in general, it also constitutes the field and test of that wisdom: the immediate context that determines how and when and where and why the general principles are applied.

The campus-wide meeting on May 4 was the culmination of two semesters' work. It began with some brief background, followed by three issue presentations—on health care, working conditions, and workload. Each issue segment was subdivided into a testimonial by a grad employee who had suffered under the current arrangement; a presentation that explained how a union-negotiated contract would improve conditions; and a question-and-answer follow up. The meeting concluded with explanations of two timetables, one long-term and one for over the summer. The first laid out some principles of organizing and described the population to be organized, then identified the goals of five hundred members by the end of the year, an affiliation decision, and a card drive commencing in the fall of 1995. The second described more immediate concerns: signing up as a new member if you weren't already one, helping to create an accurate database of members, raising money, writing letters, volunteering in other ways, and meeting with the administration to discuss the union's concerns. The GEO proved that night it could articulate its goals and plot a course for achieving them. The next three years would tell whether they were right about either.

In the fall of 1994, the GEO's Organizing Committee consisted of twelve members. Whereas a year previous, the entire organization totaled twelve individuals, all from English, this dozen activists, merely one—albeit central—unit of the union, included representatives from History; the Ecology, Ethology, and Evolution (EEE) program; Materials Science and Engineering; the Institute for Labor and Industrial Relations (ILIR); and Plant Pathology—as well as English. The composition of this group offers some insights into the possible sources of academic activism. English, the best-represented program, with five members, is an obvious wellspring, as the largest abuser of cheap teaching labor. History, which along



with ILIR contributed a pair of members, is a likely suspect for two reasons: though not as large an abuser as English, it does employ a relatively high number of graduate assistants; and some of these grads are likely to study labor history. ILIR, too, is an obvious breeding ground for activism; and while the program at Illinois included an unfortunately high proportion of human relations types, it was also home to more labor-oriented scholars. How to explain the participation of the three remaining members, from the life sciences and engineering? Here there are no obvious disciplinary causes; instead, these were simply three individuals whose experiences and dispositions attracted them to an organizing campaign. Even though, in the end, their contributions to that campaign would diminish relative to those of the other nine members, their initial interest offers a lesson in the recruitment strategy of any nascent academic union. While a good deal of a union's energy is likely to be derived from those areas of a campus that either most exploit academic labor or best attract students with laborite leanings, an organizing drive is also capable of drawing support from *any* program, and should therefore make an early push to get its message out, the better to have the widest possible level of representation when the campaign begins for real.

For the first time that fall, the campaign was carried across campus. The breakthrough came when early activists attended a meeting of the Coalition of Graduate Employee Unions (CGEU) held at Yale “and came back with a real clear idea of what organizing was, and what they needed to do.” As an early member from English put it, “I was like, ‘My God, this is a movement! This isn’t just us—this is really cool.’ And other people are on fire, and great things are happening...So things just all sort of came together at a point; that was really a turning point.” The union had also generated its first tri-fold brochure (fondly known as the blue brochure), a document that largely reproduced information from previous propaganda pieces—the May 1994 newsletter; general meeting solicitations—but added, on one of its folds, a cutout membership card and a form that could be mailed to the union’s office, indicating one of the following levels of support:

- I want to be a GEO member
- Send me more information
- I want to get involved in Organizing and Decision Making (“Graduate Employees’ Organization. Advancing”)

In some cases, the union was able to use campus mail to distribute such forms, wrapping the brochure in an addressed invitation to a general meeting.<sup>15</sup> But at this stage of the effort, the most common means of delivering entailed walking around campus and personally depositing material. To facilitate the process, lists of departmental offices were devised. Union members educated themselves about the full range of graduate programs offered by UIUC—their names, and where they were housed, and whether or not their mailboxes could be accessed. They approached secretaries about acquiring department directories and learned which bulletin boards were most likely to be read by graduate students. They researched area organizations that might have grad student members, and leafleted businesses frequented by grads. They attended meetings of various grad associations—equivalents of the EGSA from which the union had sprung—and made their pitch. In some cases, they scheduled their own meetings in departments, arranging for a room, advertising the meeting, and seeding department mailboxes beforehand with the blue brochure.

These efforts met with varying degrees of success. In November, a regular meeting of the grad student association in Anthropology, at which GEO’s presence had been advertised, drew twelve attendees, several of whom joined the union immediately afterward. That same month, distinct GEO-sponsored meetings in Sociology, Community Health, the Veterinary School, Linguistics, Statistics, and Agronomy, attracted, respectively, four, two, two, zero, zero, and zero individuals.<sup>16</sup> When people did attend, they often asked questions for which the union lacked answers, such as What was the status of labor law in the state? or Why didn’t the union stake out more specific positions on the issues?<sup>17</sup> Eventually, the union would come to learn more than it ever wanted to know about Illinois labor law.<sup>18</sup> But on the second matter, it became a strategic choice *not* to spell out demands, insofar as “having specific proposals would

(1) make it possible for the administration to respond to them, and thereby defuse the movement, and (2) create the impression that [the union wasn't] interested in what future GEO members had to contribute in these areas.”<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, the administration was already beginning to respond. That fall witnessed the first serious engagement between the GEO and university higher-ups: a conference between union representatives and an associate dean of the Graduate College, Gary Eden. Eden was the faculty liaison to the Graduate Student Advisory Council (GSAC). Beginning that August, a more energetic Grad College had been indirectly reacting to the union's campaign by soliciting members for GSAC, issuing regular newsletters, and in general, cultivating a climate of much greater responsiveness. Indeed, such responsiveness was arguably the first practical achievement to which the union could lay claim. Although the College continued to see them exclusively as students, by more actively publicizing information about “student” events and benefits and more aggressively soliciting tips for improving these, administrators like Eden were doing just what the union suggested they would: addressing the union's demands without acknowledging its right to represent graduate employees. The meeting with Eden, more cordial than such events would become, was useful at this stage of the campaign simply in terms of the credibility it brought the GEO. Eden, as expected, wanted to know what issues were motivating the campaign. He specifically invited the GEO to draft a “graduate student bill of rights,” although it was clear the College was under no obligation to honor the terms set forth by such a document. The union changed “student” to “employees,” and under the new title, identified six areas of concern: representation, impartial resolution of grievances, equal and fair treatment, clearly defined professional responsibilities, adequate compensation and benefits, and safe working conditions (“Graduate Employees’ Bill of Rights”). The document broke no new ground in terms of its argument, but, framed as a response to a formal university request and pitched as a rousing manifesto, this double-sided sheet became one of the union's important early propaganda coups. Like the newsletter and brochure, it was hand delivered or mailed to grads and made available at every GEO event.

As a result of such campaigning, as well as through more informal efforts like the weekly happy hours the union was now holding, the GEO reached its goal of five hundred members by the end of 1994. This had been the benchmark set by the internationals with whom GEO had been consulting, the achievement of which would signal to potential partners that the grad unionists were strong and successful enough to merit their support. Throughout 1994, a committee of the GEO had been researching potential affiliates. Across the nation, grad unions were partnered with an assortment of internationals. The three oldest such bodies, at Wisconsin, Michigan, and Oregon, were affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), as were the locals at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and the grads organizing at Kansas in the spring of 1995. The union at the State University of New York was affiliated with the Communication Workers of America (CWA), while nascent unions at Berkeley, Yale, and Iowa had affiliated with, respectively, the United Auto Workers (UAW), the Hotel and Restaurant Employees International Union (HERE), and the United Electrical Workers (UE). Other unions represented education workers elsewhere in Illinois, but in the end, the list of potential affiliates for the GEO came down to AFT, the National Education Association (NEA), and the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), which had recently become the recognized bargaining agent for clerical workers at UIUC. When NEA bowed out, the choice further narrowed.

The union prepared a forty-five-question survey for AFSCME and AFT. The questions covered four areas: general matters regarding how each union would fit the project of a grad employee campaign; expectations for each partner to affiliation; specific campaign plans and resources; and details about contract negotiations, dues structures, and other financial concerns. The GEO wanted to know about each union's mission statement, and how those statements compared to the GEO's needs and goals. They wanted the affiliates to identify specific challenges the Illinois campaign would face, and the benefits the GEO might derive should the campaign prove successful. They wanted to know about a local's role within each international structure. Perhaps most importantly, they sought guarantees about how many paid organizers the campaign could expect, and how much the GEO would determine who they were. They

wanted the affiliates' insights into other resource needs, the trouble presented by state labor law, and the nature of UIUC's administration. They asked about publicity and lobbying possibilities. And they asked about postelection strategies.

On April 25, 1995, the Affiliation Committee presented its findings at a general meeting, and two days later, the GEO ratified its decision to affiliate with the AFT. Both the committee and the union in general were evenly divided over the two candidates, though it was clear at the April meeting that the GEO could be comfortable with either. AFSCME's strongest point was the recent, successful campaign it had waged on behalf of clerical workers at UIUC. Its greatest weakness was that it had never mounted a campaign on behalf of grad employees. This was the AFT's strength—that it was the international affiliate for grad locals at UW-Madison, UW-Milwaukee, and Michigan. The GEO had been in close contact with organizers at these locals, and already developed informal partnerships with them. Those who opposed affiliating with AFT tended to do so on the basis of its national leadership and history. AFSCME was viewed as a more progressive organization, untainted by some of the Cold War entanglements in which the AFT had been implicated. Some GEO members were also reluctant to sign on with AFT because of its president, Al Shanker, whose long-term tenure at the helm of the union was controversial both in terms of the old-style bossism it conveyed and because his personal politics seemed far to the right of the typical GEO activist's. Certain personality issues also entered into the debate—in general, the AFSCME representatives were of the same generation as the typical GEO member, whereas the AFT's tended to be older. Finally, though, there was a sense that the AFT might be willing to commit more resources initially, and sponsor the effort for as long as it might take. “The AFT,” its regional director claimed, “will provide assistance necessary for the GEO to conduct a successful campaign to become the bargaining agent and to negotiate a first contract with the employer before the GEO will pay any dues to the AFT.”<sup>20</sup> Given the uncertain prospects presented by Illinois labor law, this assurance meant a great deal. The union couldn't count on a quick resolution. It knew the university would contest any attempt to organize under state law, and it knew the issue might only be resolved after a lengthy legal dispute.

Affiliating was perhaps the main accomplishment of the spring, but it was not the only one. In February, the union held a rally to call attention to

the lack of adequate healthcare benefits for graduate students. The GEO marched to Chancellor [Michael] Aiken's office, and delivered letters asking for better healthcare benefits. (“The GEO News-Bulletin,” Spring 1995)

It “developed an organizing committee of 45 members” and “added . . . over 150 new members” (“The GEO News-Bulletin,” Spring 1995). It drafted an issues survey, to further determine if it was focusing on the right concerns. And it continued to refine and modify its proposed constitution. The April 25, 1995 draft was significant for elevating the Organizing Committee to the role of principal leadership agent of the union, a responsibility heretofore held by the Steering Committee. Although this constitution was never approved, the change it advocated did reflect the shifting emphasis of the union. Henceforth, its main goal would be organizing to win an election. The Steering Committee would survive, under a new name, as the Coordinating Committee. Procedural decisions still needed to be made, but the most important ongoing decision—to achieve collective bargaining rights—was now the business of the Organizing Committee. One new aspect of this constitution that did survive was the shift from a president/vice president model to one with two copresidents. But in general, the union continued to struggle with how it would organize *itself*. Constitutional debates remained the one arena in which GEO members betrayed their worst habits as graduate students: endlessly nitpicking over the details of a process which, in its largest and most compelling sense—the need to build a union—enjoyed universal consent among activists.<sup>21</sup>

Needless to say, consent across campus was far from universal. One encountered resistance in organizing, and opponents were beginning to publicize their opinions in print and in electronic exchanges. A typical

such instance was an essay by Vivek Rao, a Physics grad student, which appeared in the conservative student newspaper, *The Observer*. Entitled “A bad idea whose time has come?” Rao’s piece combines the characteristic antiunion arguments. Acknowledging that “[a] graduate student union may or may not deliver on” promises to improve wages and benefits, Rao claims that a union “will certainly infringe on the freedoms of graduate students.” Confusingly, Rao then proceeds to suggest “[s]tudents would only be able to accept teaching and research appointments if the union ratified a contract,” and erroneously, the author reports that “[t]hey would be *forced* to join the union, and pay dues of 0.9% of their salaries.” All graduate employees would indeed have to pay what is known as their “fair share,” or an amount equal to the benefits they received, but they would not be made to join. And while the figure Rao cites was close to the average dues rate for grad union members nationwide, the author neglects to point out both that unions typically negotiate contracts that include a wage increase at least equal to the cost of dues, and that the GEO, from its earliest days, always pledged not to sign a contract that reduced anyone’s compensation.

Elsewhere in the piece, Rao raises the usual concerns about dues money being sent to the international affiliate, the (left-) politicized nature of such affiliates, and the prospect of a strike. But the main current of the essay is “the fundamental American principle of respect for individual rights. The right to work,” Rao argues,

is as important as the right to worship or to speak. If an employer and an employee reach an agreement, no one else should have the right to interfere. If someone wants a better package, he is free to work somewhere else . . . . Perhaps it is not too surprising that unions are making a last stand in education—schools and universities teach that big government and union privileges are the solution to the social problems created by greedy corporations. This contempt for the individual comes naturally to people who think only in terms of group rights. Union advocates at the University of Illinois are active, if misguided, and graduate students who want to maintain their freedom must fight forced unionization. (Rao, 4)

The GEO would encounter versions of this reasoning throughout its campaign. The idea that employees were already somehow able to “reach an agreement” with UIUC without a union; that a union is a kind of third party to that relationship; that all jobs essentially operate on a love-it-or-leave-it basis; that unions are uniquely responsible for politicizing the workplace; and that abject employment status equals “freedom”—these were the common attitudes of those most vehemently opposed to unionizing grad employees. (Interestingly, Rao’s entire argument depends on grad assistants being acknowledged *as* employees, and yet this was the main premise disputed by the university’s administration in combating the campaign—Rao wasn’t even aware grad assistants needed a union just to count as employees at all.) There is no argument against prejudice—the union simply had to hope that there weren’t enough Raos to derail their effort.

But if the local resistance was beginning to emerge, the GEO could always balance that against the national tide of organizing. 1995 saw not only a board-certified election victory in Kansas—bringing to eleven the number of legally recognized grad locals—but strikes at Yale and two of the University of California campuses. Organizers for the various grad unions—recognized and emerging—were meeting regularly, through both CGEU and the AFT-sponsored council, the Alliance of Grad Employee Locals (AGEL). In addition, GEO members continued to be involved in the labor struggles taking place in nearby Decatur. As much work as they faced in Champaign-Urbana, they derived encouragement from their sense of participating in a nationwide campaign. Many of them agreed with this period account from one of the Yale organizers:

The last five years have seen the establishment of recognized graduate employee unions at a rate of one per year. This past year has shown unprecedented activity in graduate employee unionization. This movement will continue to grow in strength and numbers as graduate employees on more and more campuses turn to unionization to win the workplace democracy

and improved working conditions that established graduate employee unions are already winning. (McCrossin, 6)

In the summer of 1995, no one would have known just how much longer it would take to win such benefits at UIUC, though members commonly assumed that their fight would be a sustained one. For that reason, they also didn't assume they would necessarily still be working and studying at the school when that victory occurred. Perhaps the willingness to commit to a cause from which they almost certainly wouldn't profit in any material sense constitutes the final and most valuable lesson GEO members learned from their early efforts. Education work and organized labor—often framed as incompatible by commentators such as Rao—share a common faith in the future. We teach to help prepare students for their futures; we organize in order to protect the very possibilities—the sites, the circumstances, the conditions—of teaching and learning. Learning to be labor can indeed often feel like learning to *belabor*. We often find ourselves worrying about or working at the seemingly less crucial aspects of organizing: fussing about method; fiddling with that database; asking forty-five questions when twenty—ten?—might have sufficed. But in building the commitment to one another that only comes from the shared experience of learning—making mistakes, struggling, gradually improving—together, unionists can ensure that concerns about the future will always inform contemporary practice. That at least is how one group of academics learned to be labor.

## Notes

1 On this point, see Vaughn, “Need a Break,” pp. 281-282.

2 Current union practice appears to favor this form for the acronym, but especially in the early years of the campaign, members alternated between “GEO” and “G.E.O.” I preserve the second form here in those instances where a period document so has it; otherwise, I observe the current practice.

3 As I write this, the GEO is in the process of ratifying their initial contract.

4 That decade witnessed three epic labor struggles at Bridgestone/Firestone, Caterpillar, and A. E. Staley. For more on these events, see Franklin.

5 The first incarnation of the GEO was active from the late 1980s to 1991. In 1988, it worked to oppose legislation that would have made tuition and fee waivers taxable. In the spring of 1989, they collected over one thousand signatures on a petition advocating a living wage and better health care. In the spring of 1990, members sponsored a Health Care Forum, and that fall, they helped to establish a policy that deferred fee payments until after graduate employees received their first paycheck of the semester. In 1991, they worked to secure compensation for teaching assistants undergoing orientation training. According to the “Student Organization Resource Fee Board—Application for Funding,” the organization's goals were

[t]o advocate on behalf of the interests of graduate employees regarding university, state and federal policies affecting their interests. GEO publishes a newsletter, meets with administrators and other officials, and gathers data to directly improve conditions for graduate employees.

What this organization failed to do, though, was organize as a union—a lesson its successor took to heart. Even though barely two years had passed from the demise of the original GEO till the onset of the current GEO's campaign, the alienated and transient culture of graduate life meant that the first GEO had largely faded from memory. Indeed, attempts to organize graduate employees date back at least as far as

the early 1970s. Recognizing the fragility of such efforts ought to remind prospective unionists of the need to work quickly to build enduring structures—of the kind that affiliating, funding, and constant organizing can facilitate.

6 2-28-94 notes from meeting. My practice throughout this essay is to cite public documents in text, but to endnote private memoranda and letters. All titles for public documents listed under Works Cited appear as they do in the originals, and all dating schemes for private and public documents similarly follow that appearing on the originals.

7 2-21-94 minutes.

8 2-28-94 minutes.

9 2-28-94 minutes.

10 2-21-94 minutes.

11 2-21-94 minutes.

12 All unattributed quotes are taken from a series of interviews I conducted with nineteen GEO activists between September 4, 1997 and June 29, 1998. Of the nineteen, six were in the History program, five were in English, three in Physics, two each in Kinesiology and Speech Communications, and one in Anthropology. Insofar as they remain young scholars at potentially vulnerable stages in their careers, most have elected not to be identified, and I have honored their preferences. Material from these interviews has been edited to eliminate “filled pauses”—e.g. “um,” “uh”—and obvious, unnecessary repetition, such as the recurrent interjection of phrases like “sort of,” “you know,” etc.

13 On this point, another early member—and subsequent union copresident—remembered

that stupid little Mac [in the GEO’s first office] and what a pain that was to go through that. And calling people on the phone, and trying to put lists together, and looking at the work log, and feeling compelled to have something that [he] could write down in the work log that would be impressive!

14 Another early member, recalling this phenomenon, remarked how she “was really struck by how the union was run by strong personalities, and . . . there was sort of this in group, or cliquishness, to the union. And I think that was really to our detriment.”

15 The GEO routinely encountered difficulties utilizing campus mail. Sometimes the problem was simply not having accurate mailing lists; other times they ran afoul of certain restrictions concerning mass mailings.

16 Author’s personal notes.

17 10-26-94 Organizing Committee notes.

18 On this point, see Vaughn, “Are You Now.”

19 10-26-94 Organizing Committee notes.

20 3-17-95 letter.

21 Of course, activists retain similarly competing memories of this era. One member recalled the behavior of a colleague at that time, who may have

looked like he was being obstructionist and unhelpful, but in retrospect, he might have been doing a useful thing. . . . [I]n some respects, I've taken up [that person's] mantle. . . . I remember not liking the authority structure that was set up. . . . [I] agreed to be nominated to run for the presidency. And my campaign speech essentially amounted to a denunciation of the structure of the GEO.

“[W]e tried to come up with a constitution,” remembered another early activist,

. . . [a]nd so many bizarre personality clashes were going on that had nothing to do with rational politics. . . . [W]e were fucking clueless is what was going on! People [were] saying, “Oh, you're antidemocratic.” We're not antidemocratic—we're just confused!

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