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**HARD CARDING AND SOFT FUNDING:**  
*How to Organize Ourselves and Our Unions*

1.1. In a prior contribution to *Cogs in the Classroom Factory*, I described what I believed then were the salient features of a union of contingent academic workers—the three sister chapters of Graduate Assistants United (GAU) at University of Florida (UF), University of South Florida (USF), and Florida A & M University (FAMU).<sup>1</sup> In that article, written on the eve of the 2002 statewide merger among all education unions under the Florida Education Association (FEA) umbrella, I argued that understanding our joint affiliations and merger structure would help explain the character of our individual chapters. I was also quite positive about the possibilities for growth in the grad union sector based on our “organizing” model. I instinctively described our chapter as an organizing entity only because we constantly struggled to retain membership in a contingent shop, not because I knew what an organizing campaign looked like, or because we were involved in what I would now describe as a “campaign” to engage in perpetual organizing within a social movement. I described GAU, but I did not have the tools to predict the stormy cultural and institutional changes on the horizon. I thought I had clear answers about how to build a movement culture, but I had never really studied or practiced methods of organizing to achieve that culture.

1.2. What happened after I submitted that essay for publication forced GAU, and me as an activist, to come to terms with a new definition of organizing and new ways of making power within the academy, our unions, and society at large. I believed organizing involved inviting four thousand graduate workers to a party where we would ask them to join the union. I was wrong; this did not work. Organizing is not an event, a place, or a single action. Organizing is a collection of strategies and methods for bringing consciousness and power to a community of interest. It is a lifestyle, a grand proposition about the world and humanity. Some jokingly refer to it as a religion or a faith. If by faith one means a pragmatic but undying belief that humanity can be reconnected by constant engagement between thoughtful and purposeful individuals, then faith—an upbeat and perpetually smiling faith—is an essential component of organizing. I’m not sure our best and brightest union leaders are always hip to these propositions (nor was I, for that matter). Part of the story of UF GAU is what happens when they don’t get hip, but most of it is about what happens when a few good people *do*.

1.3. In the following article, I will review the UFF’s response to the decentralization of the Florida Board of Education in the Spring of 2001, a decision that left the history of the nine UFF bargaining units in jeopardy, with a specific focus on how the GAU launched a reauthorization card drive and on the way developed an organizing culture. Some portions of this article draw on my experiences working as a contingent (in both senses of the word) organizer for the UFF’s national unions (NEA & AFT). It was

during this campaign that I discovered and better defined my own beliefs about organizing, and that I realized what we need to do to help other unionists come to those important conclusions. This was my first organizing job after a long hiatus from working as a member-organizer for GAU across the state, and my experiences with the GAU card drive reintroduced me to disillusionment and disbelief at the behavior of those outside my chapter and outside the contingent sector. But in the end this negative view turned to hope and optimism. I have done my best to appreciate the constraints under which my colleagues worked at the state and national level. However, if we are to build lifelong and hard-struggling coalitions between the unions, classes, sectors, members, and staff that compose the universe of higher education unionism, some criticism is in order.

### **The Big Question of 2002-2003**

2.1. After a rousing success in the 2000 gubernatorial election, Jeb Bush decentralized the Florida Board of Higher Education and replaced it with corporate and Bush-friendly Boards of Trustees at each of our now independent large public universities (with the splitting off of the New College from University of South Florida, they numbered eleven total, and served the people of the State of Florida and the Southeast). This was an effective punishment for the power, however slight, of the education unions, which were and remain the only truly organized native political structure capable of providing some fleeting opposition to the Republicans in Florida. AFT and NEA—at this time engaged in finalizing a statewide merger—had handpicked an anonymous conservative businessman from South Florida to run against the more popular and progressive Janet Reno. As a result of this poor political decision, not only did they lose the gubernatorial election by a wide and unanticipated margin, but they drew the ire of the Republican regime. To bust what were already weak, minority-status unions, the Republican and conservative Democrat state legislature adopted a decentralized quasi-private structure for the higher education public institutions, thereby allowing them to argue that the State of Florida was no longer the “employer” of faculty and graduate assistants, and that all union certifications were null and void.

2.2. The immediate dilemma for United Faculty of Florida, GAU’s parent organization and the union that represents that faculty and graduate employees at eleven of the state’s public universities, was whether to fight for our survival in the courts or in the field—with attorneys or with organizers. Organizing campaigns would recertify each campus bargaining unit as separate entities with separate contracts (the Graduate Assistants Union, with some foresight, and some luck, had been negotiating separate institutional contracts for two years prior to the restructuring). A court victory, on the other hand, would solve the problem statewide by forcing the Public Employee Relations Committee to recognize each individual university as a “successor-employer” to the defunct Board of Education. Concerns about the bottom line in our service union model were paramount. With declining membership, a creeping insolvency, overworked staff, internal bickering, and no visible method for regaining ground, it seemed almost cheaper to hire attorneys to fight successor-employer cases than to engage in a statewide organizing campaign. It is a secret to those outside as well as inside the state, but Florida’s high courts are bastions of moderation in an otherwise backwards region. We believed we had a decent chance for victory if we went the legal route.

2.3. On the other hand, as a very small minority of UFF leaders and GAU activists argued, a real organizing campaign would eliminate the chances of losing in the courts. With authorization cards and successful elections we could end-run a court loss, reorganize our unions, jettison units that simply didn’t pass muster (thus removing some albatrosses from the neck of statewide academic unionism), and increase dues income to rebuild the union’s infrastructure. Florida, unlike many former slave states, has fair-to-middling union laws which give us the right to collective bargaining in the public sector, even among graduate assistants. Energetic organizing drives would be a way to prove something to ourselves and to Florida’s right wing. Winning in the courts would not fundamentally change our union strength, and it could leave us broke.

2.4. This debate often played out as a disagreement between those who supported different cadres and philosophies within our now-merged nationals. Some of the disagreements were personal, but most centered around “organizing” methods, cost-sharing for The Project (as I will call it), and general principles (unions as professional organizations who serve their members in return for dues, or unions as agents for fundamental change who demand activism from their members). While cadres in each national organization challenge any stereotype, many UFF members, grads included, saw the NEA and AFT as fundamentally different organizations representing either of these approaches to unionism. One can join the NEA without knowing it is a collective bargaining entity. Some praised this fact, while others turned up their noses in disgust. Even stalwarts and advocates admitted, often in support of a hushed unionism, that the NEA promulgated a quasi-managerial culture of professionalism, public relations, and service. This was seen as an asset by what I would largely term an “old guard” of higher ed. unionists, many of whom prided themselves on distinguishing their academic work from the K-12 sector. On the other hand, an emerging and outspoken cadre of UFF members strongly disagreed with the service model and the polite professionalism of the NEA. To save our unions, this would not do.

2.5. GAU had a special role in the debate over organizing or court battles, since it is itself a weird stepchild within the NEA. We were the only NEA grad union, and an outspoken challenger to the culture of professionalism and accommodation that the NEA seemed to represent. The AFT, for all of its own problems, is clearly more devoted to an organizing culture, in part derived from the higher rates of member activism in its dominant K-12 sector. The AFT is also clearly in the vanguard in grad organizing, although plenty of horror stories about local chapter relationships with the national were exchanged when we had earlier hosted the Congress of Graduate Employee Unions (CGEU). The fact is that both unions are driven by K-12 dues and political concerns. Whether we accepted their help or not, caution was recommended by those with experience organizing under both organizations.

2.6. GAU members eventually and almost unanimously decided that this was no time for professional pride. K-12 workers are brothers and sisters, although we had failed to engage with them sufficiently in Florida, and it was now time to reap the benefits of merging with the more active and more organizing-oriented AFT national. That was part of the impetus for the merger in the first place, we thought. In the end, the organizing argument won the day, and a statewide grant funded by the NEA, AFT, and the merged Florida Education Association helped UFF get an organizing campaign under way in each of its chapters. The NEA largely donated money, while the AFT provided in-kind and staff support.

2.7. The struggle to ensure that graduate employee organizing was an item in the statewide grant was monumental. Certain UFF, AFT, and NEA officials would present themselves as strong advocates of the GAU line during negotiations over the grant, or during meetings with representatives from the powerful collective voting block of GAU chapters. Meanwhile, their staff and colleagues would explain to GAU activists that the opposite was true. One moment our faculty colleagues appeared as white knights; the next it was clear that they had waffled in order to move along the process of getting money into the more expensive faculty organizing lines. Who could blame them? Before we understood what real organizing was (the kind you do for yourself) faculty and grads seemed to be at the mercy of both nationals. If you were a grad or faculty member represented by the UFF, there was little in the history of your union to encourage you towards anything but mercy from the new benefactors. When one of the principal unions said, “roll the grads,” it is easy to see how faculty leadership would waffle. They were protecting their own hides, worn thin by decades of inactivity, an aging membership, and declining membership.

2.8. The story of the grant is complicated, and to tell it would reveal the kind of internal politicking about which no democratic organization should be proud. But to the credit of our grad chapter leadership and some faculty supporters from unlikely places, the GAU received a newly minted National Representative from the AFT for an undetermined period (a few months, as it turned out). We also got temporary organizing appointments for two of our chapter members, myself and my colleague and friend Erica Pittman. Faculty chapters with one-third or even one-fifth the employees and membership of our UF grad

chapter would later receive whole staff organizers for weeks at a time, and we complained about that. No one can tell me that quiescence would have gotten us staffing for that critical summer, when we first learned how to run a campaign. Resources only ever trickled in after heated debates, angry demands for principled decision making, and open requests for fair treatment. As we learned over the course of the campaign, unions, like universities, don't like headaches.

2.9. Our AFT Nat Rep came to us in March 2003, during which time I remained at home, largely unaware of the transformations that were about to take place in our union and my life. To be honest, the Nat Rep, was, we discovered, as much a part of the faculty organizing drive as he was part of the GAU's drive. His long hair, youthfulness, enthusiasm, anxious energy, and his passion for grassroots organizing methodology pretty much assured that his first gig with the GAU would be a perfect fit—although I'm sure he properly dreaded much of his time in Gainesville. When he arrived, we took it as a symbol that we had won an important argument among our national colleagues. Here we saw our “elders” finally helping one of the most vibrant and energetic UFF chapters stay alive.

2.10. Soon after he arrived, our Nat Rep offered Erica and me the job of helping to systematically organize our colleagues and collect signatures from the majority of our four thousand-employee graduate unit, in order to complete a deal made with the Board of Trustees to “prove” that we represented graduate workers at the University of Florida. GAU was bound to be an experiment for those of us inexperienced with large organizing campaigns. It was a mega-campaign, as I later discovered, the largest of its kind in many ways. We decided to do things the hard way, one card at a time, and honor an agreement made with the UF Board of Trustees that GAU had simply to prove majority status by having 50% + one of its graduate employees (over four thousand workers) sign cards authorizing GAU as the collective bargaining agent. GAU had been at UF for twenty-five years, but in spring of 2003 it was as if we were being forced to create our chapter for a second time.

2.11. By summer 2003, the drive to reauthorize and reorganize GAU had begun. Our non-staff fellow members had already begun the drive, but the staff influx helped tremendously. It gave us breathing room and income to deal with the stresses of campaigning. Erica and I complained about a lot of important things (like not having health benefits, or a real contract with any of the principals of the merger), but I believe the comfort provided by the income derived from these temporary positions helped us through some difficult moments kicking off the campaign while many grads were gone for the summer. By the end of August 2003, mostly through on two-on-one office visits, we had collected almost one thousand authorization cards. Many of these were from Engineering, Materials Science, Computer Science, and other non-humanities. The myth of antiunionism in these fields is strong, but it is easily punctured by actual fieldwork. These largely male, international, and research money-oriented fields yielded no statistically significant lower card counts than any other.

### **A Summer of Discontent: How the Personal Informs the Political**

3.1. The cards collected that summer don't tell the whole story, for I was struggling with a return to activism, a return largely driven by the need for income and redemption. The income part is easy to explain—I had been living on an above-the-table income of approximately \$10,000/year for quite some time. The Project was offering four times that amount.

3.2. After I wrote the first essay about GAU, I had largely disappeared from the graduate union activism that had given me the knowledge and authority to complete that analysis. I had shied from unionism after an attack on my personal integrity by a former friend among the union membership. Hailing from the trailer park, and accustomed to the workaday diplomacy of the semi-employed folk in the small South Texas ranch town of my upbringing, I had no experience with the usual and customary liabilities of leadership in an academic union. I took things personally, instead of recognizing our union's self-inflicted wounds as the result of our own powerlessness and our own pretension to power. This is the bane of

professional unions, especially unions of intellectuals. Our stock in trade is argument and debate, the two most damaging modes of discussion for nascent organizing campaigns. Too self-absorbed to recognize that it wasn't about me, and too eager for an excuse to quit, I opted out of my duties as a citizen-scholar. In other words, I quit. But what kind of example had I set for my comrades and colleagues, for students, for activists across the country? I had only affirmed the fleeting solvency of our graduate union.

3.3. My hiatus grew longer and longer, even as the crisis of certification under the restructuring process mounted daily. Given to long bike rides, dissertating, and odd jobs, I was as involved in GAU at the beginning of the card drive in spring 2003 (close enough to finals week that it might as well be called "summer") as I wanted to be—which was not at all. I had been advising officers on an ad hoc basis, or occasionally stumbling into statewide UFF governance meetings in Orlando. I had also become very fast at bicycle racing and spent what I thought was useful time adding value to myself by reading radical texts, compiling lecture notes, working on my dissertation, and racing in the velodrome in Trexlertown, Pennsylvania. For a while, I even believed everything would fall into place if I only just finished my Ph.D. When our new AFT Nat Rep approached me, on the advice of my comrades, about taking a position in The Project, I could barely assemble myself for a field interview. I had become a real slacker, but I didn't wear it well. If the promise of money had not been held out, I might have declined.

3.4. I mention this because it is important to know that most of us were not born into the role of union organizer. You are in for tough times unless you have it in your upbringing, or some deep place in your psyche, to willfully commit to struggle. Union activism is an unnatural and unlikely role for a lot of people, and perhaps most especially for those attracted to the academy. With some notable exceptions, the professoriate has traditionally shied from practicing its putatively "liberal" politics in full view. Many faculty imagine themselves outside of politics, if only in order to maintain some self-imagined "objectivity" from which to evaluate history, politics, and contemporary culture. That is to say, the movement has produced radical scholars, but radical scholarship has contributed much less to the movement.

3.5. Our personal stories and our Americanism also lead us away from unionism. This is the subject of many books, but let me give a personal example. I am from the trailer park zones of our Southern borderland with Mexico, where unions literally do not exist. Most people in my position feel lucky to be in graduate school or to have well paying jobs, and our only experience with unions is a sprinkling of strike stories from the long-ago, faraway history of immigrant industrialism or Western mining. Given the new access to the academy prompted by the post-WWII G. I. Bill and numerous civil-rights struggles, the last half of the twentieth century saw the emergence of a whole new "academy," one populated by people like me—students, faculty, and even administrators who believed their positions to be tenuous, contingent upon good behavior, or even, perhaps, a sham. We are not to the manner, nor to the ivory tower born. Unions require leaders, and leadership is by definition a dangerous social proposition. No one ever taught me how to be a leader or how to handle the struggles of leadership.

3.6. If we are to organize the academy, we have to let the sons and daughters of immigrants, the small town scholars, and urban students (to name a few) define the academy, and its unionism, for themselves. They have to be made comfortable by the better-heeled academics (faculty, graduate, and student activist alike) who do not mispronounce "annals" in their first graduate seminar (I still turn red remembering that one). There were plenty of comrades in the struggle who knew where I was from, because I loved to tell them about it, but I never confessed my insecurities. I bluffed my way through it all, and I suffered the consequences.

3.7. Perhaps this is true for all attempts at leadership and for all organizing projects. Experienced organizers must admit that a lot of our first stabs at activism are a confidence game we play with ourselves. If we don't soon discover a method to carry us through difficult moments, we quickly get lost in the contradictions, cynicism, and self-loathing of ourselves and of those we organize. If we don't have

the outspoken support and faith of our colleagues, we will easily pay more attention to the arrows of controversy which accompany any academic enterprise (even and especially organizing).

3.8. I was able to come around, but it took a lot of nights at the pub and days on the bicycle. Not everyone has this leisure. Not everyone was fortunate to have the teachers that I had—Erika Gubrium, Candi Churchill, Marcus Harvey, Louis Bolieux, Gainesville’s Civic Media Center family, and Rob Callahan. But the beauty of organizing is that when you see it taught and done well, it produces a genuine transformation. Some people get this and some people don’t, but everyone is capable of becoming an organizer. The eyes illuminate, tensions abate, and uncertainties about one’s colleagues in the field are erased.

3.9. Those of us who have organized will recognize the details of the transformation—it plays out pretty much the same everywhere, so much that activists of any stripe can often tell you exactly “who” it was that “organized” them and when (Marcus Harvey, 1996). The process involves teaching people how to listen patiently and attentively to their colleagues, mostly avoiding the hyperrationality, argument, and debate that are the academic stock in trade. By a sometimes Socratic method of discovery and education (Them—“What will the union do for me?” Us—“What can we do together?”), people who have never thought of activism, and who many times hate unions instinctively, end up signing a card, thanking you for taking the time to listen, and thinking about the world in a different way. Sometimes (be patient, be very patient) they even join.

3.10. The GAU method was one culled from years of grassroots organizing, and specifically from union card drives. The new organizer often cuts their teeth first in “role plays” with “fake” colleagues (usually the teacher and other organizers). These role plays are subjected to criticism by an audience of co-organizers. The roles are reversed, and the “organizer” becomes the unknowing colleague, the “target” of the office visit, phone call, or other intimate contact. I have eliminated a lot of the criticism from the equation, because people almost always catch the problems themselves, and because academics have a tendency to enjoy this portion of the role playing too much. Most of the time, people know what they are doing wrong without much enticement. “I’m arguing aren’t I,” they typically ask with a smile. “What do you think?” I say. The methods vary from campus to shop to neighborhood, but they always work. Why? Because humanity is desperate to reconnect itself to a larger purpose and to realize a return to a community of hope and action that has been supplanted by fear, greed, false intimacy, and cynicism. When people stand next to other people and listen, fear is exposed, and it vanishes (albeit, in a demonstrably and painfully slow manner).

3.11. As the GAU approached one thousand cards near the end of the summer, I was truly elated. Not only about the cards, but the one thousand conversations these cards represented and the many GAU members who had come out with staff and on their own to work in the field. People across campus were asking questions of their advisors, administrators, and of their union that they had not asked before. For all our attempts to hit at visceral themes, bread and butter issues, and listen to our coworkers, it was quite the existential experience. I learned that summer that organizing is, first and foremost, about getting people to overcome their fear of speaking in public. Not to an audience, but to each other.

3.12. The organizers, I think, got as much or more from it than the organized. We had not yet offered a pdf download or many mailing options (and even these later innovations were built on a foundation of traditional methods of internal, face-to-face organizing), so those first cards represented very real interventions in the lives of coworkers. Almost daily I am disappointed in the cynicism or shortcomings of my own organizing work as well as that of my co-unionists. Each day I have to remind myself, if someone or something has not already, that we are not in power. This is an uphill struggle. But after the summer organizing of 2003, I know I will never leave the movement again.

3.13. In the difficult position as a neo-pro organizer of contingent workers, our Nat Rep (himself a veteran of a graduate campaign) taught me many of these things. The rest I had already learned from my feminist friends (who know more about organizing than most), but until that summer I hadn't really paid attention. I must confess, however, that even when the promise of learning a craft and regaining my identity as an activist presented itself, I still took the job mostly because of the money. The work was week to week, with no benefits, with a motley cast of supervisors and superiors running a loose operation, but at a rate of \$40,000 a year, what part-timer could refuse? The more I realized that this was the most important job in our union, the more upset I became at the contingency of my salary and employment. But I was helping people help themselves, and it beat working for Domino's or hammering shingles to a hot roof.

### **Fall 2003: The FSU Campaign and the Other One That Ran on Its Own**

4.1. The fall of 2003 saw us closer to success, but it also revealed the full force of our staffing crisis for the GAU card drive. The Project intended to move our Nat Rep, myself, and other Project staffers across the state, to an important faculty election at Florida State University (FSU) in Tallahassee. While we were at FSU, my coworker and coconspirator Erica stayed at GAU holding down the fort with the member-activists. The FSU campaign was excruciating and dull, but we eventually won a record authorization election. Over seven hundred FSU faculty voted to have UFF continue to represent them. Fewer than fifty voted against. Some saw it as an affirmation of UFF's continued presence in the state, but it more resembled the "Anyone but Bush" attitude that later prevailed in the 2004 presidential election. I believe the vote was more of a no-confidence statement about Jeb Bush's higher-ed regime than about the efficacy or desirability of UFF.

4.2. With ample would-be soldiers, a wizened veteran Nat Rep (Norm Holsinger, who was in charge of statewide Project organizing), and goal-driven activists on the ground, we ran a tight get-out-the-vote campaign. We didn't know everyone who voted against, but almost every single person that voted "yes" had already told us they were going to do so. The best thing I learned from this GOTV was that it could be done. It was a softball (no significant antiunion campaign), but it was a valuable lesson in election engineering (as opposed to electioneering, which is unethical and illegal). You can't learn passion, but GOTV, like the first stages of an organizing campaign, is pure science requiring instruction in method and tactic. It helps to have paid staff, because it is a full-time job. The technical, vote-oriented, and organizing-light version of unionism we call GOTV is an excellent contrast to the real community-building work of a long-term card drive or membership campaign.

4.3. It was a grand GOTV schoolhouse for this novice, but FSU was also a Pyrrhic victory that unintentionally revealed both the relative strength of the UF GAU campaign, and the importance of not relying on help from national unions. In the orgy of overdoing the campaign we had gained few members during the actual GOTV, and the GOTV was largely accomplished by contingent organizers in both senses of the word—activists hailing from the contingent academy (some former GAU members) and activists working on part-time, temporary contracts for The Project. Another telling statistic was that while each GAU authorization card "cost" a pittance in resources, each FSU vote cost exorbitant sums. We had a veritable army of vote-getters on the ground in Tallahassee from all over the state, and it is not cheap to feed and house out-of-town workers.

4.4. The FSU election spoke to some truths that were emerging in the GAU and the larger statewide campaign, truths, I have since learned, that plague academic organizing. The most difficult to fathom was that faculty members at FSU seemed almost to be working at odds with the organizing campaign. At lunches and meetings, organizing and the staff and methods that could propel it forward were largely ignored. Faculty members did not really meet with the staff, it was more as if we sometimes sat in on their lunches. Discussions focused on technicalities, on "what the merger (i.e., The Project) is going to do for us," or, at its worst, "what our chapter was going to do after the organizing is over." The concept that

organizing can somehow, or ever, be “over” is heresy to an organizer. It seemed dogma to the FSU faculty.

4.5. From a staff perspective the organizing had really just begun—with the help of a strong lead staff and some stalwart departments. As a staff for the summer GAU campaign and veteran of UFF politics, I was not naïve about our transformative capacity at FSU. One of the founding chapters in UFF, it had become a sleepy Southern albatross of a bargaining unit, with a long tradition of service unionism and a barely budding infrastructure from the recent statewide drive. Unfortunately, old leaders were running the “new” FSU chapter. They eagerly awaited the end of organizing, a return to the negotiating table, and the resumption of those deprecating psychological “benefits” that accrue to those with minority status.

4.6. Because the antiunion campaign at FSU was virtually absent, the election victory was seen as a foregone conclusion instead of an opportunity to excite people about the union. The card drive at UF GAU, on the other hand, was an organizing project propped by the exigency of reauthorization and by the serious political and personal commitment of young intellectuals and academic workers. In a political conundrum of which I only later became aware, resources were funneled to the chapter at FSU because it was most intransigent about organizing. The more FSU leadership snubbed organizing, the more staff were required to win the election. Members simply weren’t going to do the work. In office visits, despite some wonderfully rewarding encounters, many faculty treated the nine or ten staff like grad students. This was, I remarked openly at staff meetings, an issue of class and status, not just of the exigency of the GOTV campaign. Most of us—a few notable exceptions notwithstanding—were currently or had been graduate organizers, although we might define ourselves first as feminists or environmentalists. The faculty treated us as they had treated grads under their employ for decades—as secretaries or as bystanders. Like many academic unionists, they believed activism was a necessary evil that had to be undertaken so we could all return to the business of filling our academic resumé and “creating knowledge.” Staff were more than a little indignant about this attitude. We were there to help them organize their union, not to grade papers or prepare their labs. With all respect to the humility one should adopt when organizing, we saw ourselves as teachers sent to teach our faculty colleagues how to run an organizing campaign, not hired guns.

4.7. I don’t want to paint an entirely negative picture of the fall 2003 drive. Although most of the UFF’s staff resources had been pirated away to a needy but unappreciative faculty chapter in Tallahassee, we had reason to be happy in Gainesville. Cards continued to trickle in at GAU. A giant leap forward occurred after the innovation of authorization petitions was introduced by our Nat Rep. He had always asked us to de-emphasize confidentiality, to ask people to proudly display card signing, membership, and, if they desired, constructive criticism of the union. Now grad workers had the chance to display their authorizations publicly to their colleagues in their department and across campus. The petitions worked, and they gave a collective cast to authorization cards that are too often shrouded in a fetishistic veil of secrecy. Those who desired confidentiality could still sign the other cards. Grads from Bush’s “axis of academic evil”—students from countries like Iraq, North Korea, Cuba, and Libya who were afraid to leave the U. S. for fear they would not be allowed to return—were particularly vocal about wanting to sign the cards in the privacy of their offices, away from the prying eyes of advisors, UF staff, and even their fellow countrymen. Little did I know that standing with our international student and worker colleagues in the face of xenophobia would prove critical to the campaign. The international graduate workers have risen above and beyond the call of duty to make GAU a truly collective voice at University of Florida.

4.8. The petitions were especially useful during our fall New Grad Orientation, which I was able to participate in as staff just prior to being sent to Tallahassee. All new grads had to attend administration-led sessions on classroom teaching, university rules, and the like. The university had many years ago excised the most popular and useful portions of the orientation—GAU-led breakout seminars on issues like student-teacher sexual harassment and romantic fraternization (an ongoing problem in the academy which

administrators would rather sweep under the rug), dealing with difficult advisors, and discussions of ethical problems in research and teaching as grads. But turnout is fair play. Instead of teaching new grads inside the building how to better serve UF and its constituents, we stood outside the building and engaged them in one-on-one discussions about their hopes and fears as new academic workers. As always, some of our organizers were more card oriented than conversation oriented, but it was hot, and we had little time between seminars. We gained hundreds of signatures in several days. Of course, this barely made up for the hundreds of cards we had “lost” from spring and summer grads leaving the bargaining unit due to fellowships, economic hardship, or much-awaited graduations. Organizing really was a perpetual motion machine. It had to be, or we would never even break even.

4.9. After the FSU election, I quit The Project. When I returned from Tallahassee in late October, we still had the hardest part of the GAU drive to finish, and I did not want to serve at the whim of the AFT (or any other national) when my home union was in danger of decertification. In order to steel myself against the loss of income and the inevitable self doubt which would follow this decision, I had already sprinkled some pointed and idealistic talk among my colleagues about the relative value of money over principle. This was talk—it hurt to quit The Project, and I was truly scared of being broke once again. I would be unemployed, with no benefits, and no chance at unemployment pay (since I didn’t get laid off).

4.10. The GAU campaign, for its part, was facing some real obstacles. The turnover rate in our four-thousand-employee unit could be as much as one-quarter of all workers, many times it was more than that. Although we would not lose as many of the 1400 “good” cards between fall 2003 and spring 2004 as we lost from spring and summer 2003 to fall 2003, the “low-hanging fruit” had been plucked. Our organizing committee looked strong on paper (nearly one hundred commitments to work on the campaign), but we were learning the hard way that it takes incredible force of will, and hundreds of phone calls, just to get twelve people to turn out for three hours of organizing in the grad student housing. One thing we all learned from the GAU card drive is that organizing success really is measured one card, one conversation, and one warm body at a time. In my sometimes volunteer, sometimes contracted staff position, working after September 2003 for UFF and GAU, not for The Project, I discovered that the GAU organizing drive had begun to build a new culture and structure. That culture honored organizing volunteers and organizing staff, even while it criticized their employers or the national unions. Members of the new culture placed less value on debate and argument and more on solving problems. Most important, the GAU leadership was not afraid to speak on behalf of itself and its constituents. GAU had changed its image from a moribund and distant humanities organization run by several-dozen radical scholars, into a vibrant collective of engineering, education, international, feminist, nontraditional, and working family co-unionists.

4.11. It needed staffing and an occasional cheerleading session, but the card drive had largely become a machine that ran on its own. Not because of a particular strategic plan, logical argument, or computer program, but because of the solidarity, community, and shared struggle that undergirded it.

### **The Underbelly of the Organizing Beast**

5.1. This new culture thrived in spite of, and perhaps *to spite* the very culture of anti-organizing and negativism which challenged it. It didn’t help that, by that time, the statewide staff was largely composed of activists who had entered the The Project in hopes of ultimately working at their former and current GAU chapters. These organizers, mostly women by the way, were becoming wary of The Project and its methods. They had been sent to faculty chapters as lead persons, organizing trainers, and semi-managers of critical campaigns, but they had no benefits, no guarantee of employment beyond two weeks, and no consistent message from any of the state or national organizations about their value, purpose, or the viability of The Project itself. Although our supervisors and hiring agents were AFT Nat Reps, we were told we didn’t really work for anyone, certainly not the AFT, the NEA, or UFF. Our supervisors on The Project refused to even sign papers saying that we worked for them.

5.2. One colleague called the conditions ironic. I believe “unfortunate” is a more accurate description. We were “hard” carding at GAU, struggling and playing by the rules of a good organizing campaign. But our statewide staff were “soft” money employees. Indeed, we were told, it was best not to speak to anyone about the fact that we worked at all. Because of national union politics, too many inquiries of that nature could jeopardize The Project and, ultimately, the GAU campaign. Representatives from the principals claimed to be making deals to keep The Project alive, while at the same time their colleagues told us they were the deal *breakers*. Who were we to believe? Because of competing stories and inconsistent employee policies, The Project staff learned to trust no one but each other. As organizers of women, workers, and student employees, we were accustomed to sticking by our own, but we would have preferred a climate of trust among our supervisors, the principals, and the faculty members for whom we ultimately worked. Comrades from each merger principal anonymously e-mailed and slow-mailed damning memorandums which confirmed our suspicions—staff, the graduate staff especially, were not only of little concern to the merger principals, we were often held in contempt.

5.3. More surprising, or so I thought as a new union worker, was the general reaction to our attempts at forming a Project staff union. According to the principals, we could not organize because no one had the authority to negotiate with us. Although many of us felt as if we were scabbing Nat Rep and FEA staff labor, we were told we had no right, no cause, no means, and no justification to organize (the only cure for the “scab” syndrome, in my book). Chances are, we were told, a staff union would end The Project, and our employment in general. At one point, certain national representatives refused to speak with me about working conditions and terms of employment. Not only did I not work for the principals, they claimed, I didn’t even work for The Project itself.

5.4. When word got out that Project staff might be forming our own union and possibly doing a work slowdown during the FSU campaign to educate UFF members about our conditions (a safe action, since the vote was a wrap), unsuspecting staffers and members from the NEA and AFT were flown in to support the GOTV in case we walked. They appeared suddenly and mysteriously one Monday. They left after the election. We had no need for them—the election was won. When they understood why they were there, they were angry. They were naturally surprised to learn of our intended actions and dismayed that they might be asked to play the scab against our attempt to unionize. We demurred—there was an election to be won, nerves were frayed, and, well, maybe we were just too scared. Ever the contingent workers, we opted for employment over struggle, however temporary and unsatisfying.

5.5. The GAU was particularly disturbed at this turn of events in Tallahassee, as it had immediate relevance to their attempts to get staff back on the GAU card drive. We pointed out that, after all, it was our sector that had proudly and gladly produced much of The Project talent in Florida. Although some of our best allies counseled against it, our GAU officers challenged the treatment of the people who worked for them as staff, loudly and openly, even while they were pleading for more Project staff. I will never forget the risks that the chapter took to stand up for its principles and for Erica Pittman and me. Whatever the GAU won in resources, and whatever pride I had left as a staff in the morally unstable Project, was thanks to steadfast GAU officers demanding that the merger principals do the right thing.

### **Spring 2004 and the Final Drive**

6.1. When we returned from winter break to the new year of 2004, we had lost fewer cards than predicted (fewer than two hundred). Most grad workers on appointment for the fall are on appointment for the spring as well. But the task was not done. Clearly, Project funding was never coming back, and people were getting tired. Not since early September 2004 had any “merger money” come to the GAU recertification campaign. Although occasional infusions (\$300 one week, none the next, \$300 the next week) trickled in from a general UFF fund (to help fund my position as a chapter organizer outside The Project), the well was dry. Project staff were present, but they were not involved in the GAU campaign.

On top of that, the more embattled faculty chapter at University of Florida was in the throes of a crisis, not sure when or if it was having an election or a court battle for its critical recertification, and unsure if the university was going to be able to add two thousand supposedly antiunion agriculture, medical, and professional school faculty to its current faculty bargaining unit of 1800. This was yet another excuse to not give money to grad organizing, even though it was clear that UF solidarity was necessary across class, income, and professional boundaries between contingent and full-time academics.

6.2. More excuses were handed down, the general message being that GAU was not as important as other units, and that, while faculty needed coddling, we were expected to run a pure up-by-the-bootstraps campaign. In truth, we were victims of our own success. Our commitment to the campaign had moved along the largest card drive in Florida's history, maybe even one of the largest academic card drives in U. S. history. But our commitment to organizing led UFF and The Project to believe, rightly so, that the lack of resource infusions would not hurt us but propel us to succeed, if for no other reason than to prove we could. An elected leader of one of the merger principals sickly joked that, since I had resigned, supposedly to return to help my GAU comrades, there was no longer a need to actually *pay* anyone to do the work (thankfully, our UFF state office and the local chapter found some money to help me get by while doing the work of the union).

6.3. Indeed, through all of this the principals believed that there was a cult of personality associated with the GAU campaign. But our elders were confusing assistance with authority—the card drive had never belonged to me or to any one GAU activist. I was the “lead” on the drive at certain times, but I personally witnessed no more than ten card signatures during the last half of the campaign. The active members did all the one-on-one work. It took longer this way. It felt better, and it is the right way to do the business of organizing. If we had been in a pinch, I could have turned out an eighty-hour week in the eleventh hour, but there was no need. My colleagues did just fine on their own.

6.4. GAU was on its own and proud, but the realities of contingent organizing can weigh heavily on even the most devoted union. If we didn't finish that spring, before April 2004, our cards would start to “die.” The law dictates that signatures are only good for a year. At any rate, even if the cards didn't die, we would lose about 25% of our unit at the end of spring 2004, and another large portion at the end of summer 2004. Few of us imagined that we could muster the strength to do virtually the whole campaign over again the next fall. The cards had to be turned in by April, and approval by the Board of Trustees was needed by the end of spring. We were excited and proud of our accomplishments, but no one has infinite energy. Over time, things fall apart, especially in a high-turnover unit like ours. One thing that kept us going was a new flock of activists and organizers who were committed to spending time in the office and doing some of the day-to-day business of the union and of organizing. Having a well-lit, clean, up-to-date, and highly active office space is critical to winning a campaign and to keeping contingent workers interested in the union. Having the grads on board who work in the very building that houses the union office (the Education Building) is important too—we finally got connected with Education grads, who seemed a natural pro-union sector all along but whom we had not systematically organized in the past.

6.5. The spring of 2004 was really the denouement to the drama and disappointment of merger funding and principal patronage. We did win. And in the final weeks of the drive, after the cards were done, The Project did send back a few organizers. No one can explain why—perhaps to celebrate, perhaps out of shame, but they came. I was busy moving on to a well-paying and full-time job (with benefits) working for a faculty union up North. I barely had time to reflect on the magnitude of what a group of beleaguered, adventurous, and devoted comrades had accomplished the hard way. Our organizing committee never got to the magic ten-percent level that old-school union activists suggest. That would have meant having four hundred organizers! I believe the old ten-percent model just won't hold in a nascent shop of contingent workers. You're lucky to get five percent, and that would take a lot of staff and a more concentrated campus than UF, which is spread from end to end over miles of crowded roads, temporary buildings,

viaducts, and swamp. But we did have a group of about one hundred folks who gathered anywhere from one to fifty cards a piece.

6.6. By the time the cards were counted in March 2004, we had a total signed card pool of over 3600. Not all of those came about as a result of one-on-one organizing conversations, but when they did arrive in the mail from cutouts, Xeroxes, pdf downloads, or crumpled petitions, they were always from a department or building where we could identify past organizing, activism, or a devoted union steward. Some people even signed two or three times (of course, we only counted them once).

6.7. We even had what I call “rogue” organizers, people who never called us or joined the Organizing Committee, but who we knew from other sources to be capable and outspoken advocates of GAU, or of just getting together to do something as grads. Most of these rogues, not to mention many of our best organizers in the middle and later parts of the campaign (after we bothered to engage them), were international students. As an observation, I will note that many Latin American countries and India as well, have a civic culture in which unionism is not seen as odd, but as necessary and normal. I also know that UF and its GAU were at the forefront in the battle to eliminate the “security” or “terror” fee imposed on international grads. Like many grad unions across the country, we explored litigation on the matter. The university claimed the fee protected us from unwanted exchanges of nuclear and bio-terror technology, but it became clear that the \$50/semester fee was a revenue-generating device that punished international workers for not being American. The card drive would have looked very different without the support and networking of international workers, many of whom have large and highly organized campus organizations that typically welcomed GAU speakers and activists. In a globalized academy, alliances with international groups is common sense.

6.8. I mentioned 3600 cards, but we only needed 2100 (partly as a safety bumper for bad cards) to make our 50% + 1 for the four thousand in unit. This should give you an idea of the magnitude of contingency in our workforce, for only 2100 of those were “live” or “in unit” during the “snapshot” we offered to the Board of Trustees in Spring 2004. Throughout the campaign, we were a little upset that so many cards would not be counted. Many of them were from “students” and not “employees” proper. And, although we understood the logic of the “snapshot” method—it kept management from moving the target as much as the union from cheating—the thought of all those “unused” or worthless cards grated.

6.9. But that was only when we thought of the cards as cards, and not as markers of a people on the path to an organized workplace. If you are doing hard carding, not the kind that gets done at the last minute by a legion of external staffers, then you can rightfully count a lot of those little blue pieces of paper as reminders of someone’s first engagement with any number of positive things—their colleague, a fellow worker, a fellow teacher, unions, solidarity, and even social justice. I am a student of commodity fetishism and of theories of the fetish. I am all too familiar with the way objects come to represent and even replace the humanity. But I choose to remember those cards as the embodiment of something larger than an accumulation of signatures. I know we often stuttered, retreated in fear, or pulled a Johnny Robot to get those cards (“I am grad. Please sign card. Thank you. Bye.”), but we did it ourselves. And I am proud to say that, by the end of it all, not one GAU activist wanted to do this any way but the hard way—one card, one conversation, one struggle at a time.

## **We Won**

7.1. Enjoy those words, a veteran organizer told me. You rarely get to say them in our business. Victory in contingent organizing is as fleeting as a History M.A. on a semester-long teaching appointment at a community college. The GAU could die tomorrow.

7.2. True. But the people it changed are living, breathing, and still organizing. We did win. I will take as measures of success several things resulting from the organizing drive: the creation of an active and well-

oiled international graduate coalition and GAU International Issues Chair, the first truly contested elections for GAU officer positions (hard to believe so many people now *want* the job), the ascendancy of an outspoken and efficient cadre of long-struggling women into the ranks of GAU leadership and high office, a newfound respect for GAU evident in the tone and manner of the most recent contract negotiations, and an institutional memory and organizational culture that will outlive the personalities and individuals who had prior defined the identity of the union. On this last point, I note that, whereas GAU was typically confused with graduate student council or associated with a small band of leftist oddballs from the humanities (myself included), we now spread our voice, image, and influence over a larger part of the campus. Very few people could say in spring of 2004—“Who is GAU?” To be sure, if we don’t keep on organizing, the new grads in spring of 2006 will be able to say this, but I think we now know better than to let that happen.

7.3. As to those “real” gains that service unionists and especially contingent workers rightfully value—UF GAU just bargained its best contract in a quarter of a century. And nothing, not one thing, changed at the negotiating table, except that we now have the confidence and leverage that comes with a hard carding campaign. We have now, as we have had in the past, the same high-quality, experienced, well-spoken, and eminently rational negotiating talent. Our new strength comes from voice, struggle, community, and organizing—tasks to which the most recent members of our negotiating team, by the way, have been long committed.

7.4. Minor victories are often forgotten, but they are equally important. The devils, and the angels, are in the details. I had once believed that building infrastructure would make the union stronger. No doubt the improved electronic communications, database management, and newsletter production of the GAU was important, but it was the organizing that helped us build the service infrastructure, not vice-versa. Organizing also created power, personnel, ideas, and a committed labor force. We now have well-populated office and a more reliable infrastructure that won’t suffer the long sleep of the academic summer, and, while I argued for our professionalism in the first essay on GAU, our officer cadre is now much less likely to fall apart from interpersonal bickering or due to the inevitable tribulations of individual academic careers. And, even though UFF recently decided to hire an executive director/attorney with no union experience (I wish him the best), our statewide union must, even more than before, listen to the GAU, its most outspoken voting block, before it undertakes a return to service unionism and legalistic approaches. The success of the GAU and other organizing campaigns in the state are too important to ignore. The fact that many of our activists have gone on to national jobs with organized labor, especially academic labor, should suggest to UFF and its merged principals that, at times, they may have underestimated our value.

7.5. It is going to take a long time for many of our UFF chapters to unlearn the staff-focused resource fetishism driven to new heights by the struggle for merger money and affiliate support. By necessity more than desire, GAU has taken the first steps in being self-reliant. GAU members also proved, once again, that the future of organizing the academy lay with those who do most of its teaching and a large part of its research—contingent faculty. Those who do the work can define the work and stop the work and improve the work. Those who give the grades can withhold them (even while teaching their students a valuable civic lesson, if it comes to that). With nothing left to lose but their pride, contingents have everything to fight for, and every reason to develop the Next Big Ideas about how to win the academy back from its enemies within and outside the ivory tower. We proved with thousands of personal conversations and authorization cards that grads know they make the university work, especially at UF where the administration claims to have avoided the adjunct faculty model, but only by hiring more of us. I hope that we can convince our faculty colleagues that this is the right, and perhaps the only, way to make our unions strong again.

7.6. The GAU proved that it is not essential to wait in vain for any parent organization to take up the reins of our struggle. Use their resources, learn from their organizing staff, thank them, argue and

demand more of what you deserve, for your cause is just. But salvation comes from within. We have to have faith in our ability to work out problems with each other, especially in our ability to absorb, retool, and refine some of the pain of our weakness into a levelheaded activism which will drive us to victory. We also have to know when to walk away, not from each other, but from national unions or individuals who undermine us. Jesus of Nazareth said it best—if after hearing your message of hope, they deny you sanctuary and audience, then let no dust settle at your feet.

7.7. At the same time, we learned (mostly by trial and error, I think) that it is important to respect the class and professional identity markers that make many faculty cling to service unionism at mature chapters. Organizing doesn't play out in measurable gains and losses over the short term like negotiations; litigation; or a quick, single-issue public relations boost. And organizing takes incredible force of will and discipline to practice, no matter if you've done it for five days or fifty years. Contingents need to recognize, as those of us at GAU did not at the beginning, that extreme patience is required to adjust from service unionism to organizing. Even more patience and discipline is required to become a student again, especially if your teacher is a wide-eyed ABD with a hint of scorn for academic pretension.

7.8. These things make organizing difficult for full-time faculty. They have been inundated by their own and the administration's culture of professionalism and overwork. They have largely given up control over their work by acceding to adjunct and graduate labor. And they have been weakened by tiring efforts to gain tenure and status within an academy that no longer pays the social wage of prestige. They have adopted many of the conceits and pretenses of management in order, they believe, to survive. In some ways, contingents present the promise of the future to them, but we are also emblems of their failure to protect the ivory tower from deskilling and factory methods.

7.9. We have many tenure-line faculty allies in the movement. Some are adept and eager to organize on the grassroots model of building relationships through face-to-face conversations about the workplace and academic culture. But like contingent union activists, many of them have to be carefully taught. If current trends continue, the Florida model will obtain, and most of them will be taught organizing methodology by former contingent organizers. I believe that if we are patient, most will come around. If not, then contingents must lead the work of organizing. We are already the majority of the academic workforce, so it is only natural. But how much easier it would be with the full and untarnished solidarity of our tenured colleagues.

7.10. It is an odd thing for so many people to fight so hard to understand and improve the lives of workers who, by their own admission, hope to get out of their part-time positions as soon as possible. It is also a beautiful thing, and a testament to the vision inaugurated by that strange admixture of contingency and activism. The GAU card drive really was a small part of what most of its participants do as a part of the large social movement around them. Many of my grad comrades no longer seek academic employment, or at least not with the all-consuming devotion which we might imagine for someone who has been in school for ten years (or more). Rather, they seek edifying, full-time struggle (sometimes even with pay) in defense of working people, public education, and other causes. If they become wise to the energy and vision of contingents, the big education unions will elect and hire organizers from the contingent sectors, academic and otherwise, to the highest officer and staff positions within the next twenty years. This will mark a true watershed in our struggle to rebuild the house of academic labor.

## Notes

1. Thompson, James. "Unfinished Chapters: Institutional Alliances and Changing Identities in a Graduate Employee Union." *Cogs in the Classroom Factory: The Changing Identity of Academic Labor*. Ed. Deborah M. Herman & Julie Schmid. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003. 117-135.

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