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## UNIONS, UNIVERSITIES AND THE STATE OF TEXAS

### **Part One: The Texas State Employee's Union and the Struggle for a Tuition Waiver [Watkins]**

Kirsten Christensen and I are not labor historians, and neither of us has an academic interest in the study of unions and universities. Instead, we consider ourselves teachers and researchers, graduate students interested in and committed to careers in higher education — interested, and concerned to the point of alarm.

What we would like is to try to tell you what we have been doing as members of the Texas State Employee Union over the last several years, and to try to explain why we feel unions are needed at universities. To be frank, one of our purposes is to get you to join a union.

We are going to divide our presentation into two parts; first, I would like to spend a few minutes talking about union organizing in Texas, and about the T.S.E.U. (the Texas State Employees Union), and then about what the Instructional Workers Branch— the organization that seeks to represent faculty and graduate students at UT— has been trying to achieve. I say trying, because as I hope you already understand, there is still a lot to be done. We have made some progress, remarkable progress in some cases, but the University of Texas remains an institution under threat; under threat because it exploits its workers, both graduate students and staff— and even more importantly— because it more and more seems an institution no longer aware of its purposes.

We believe that UT, like several other major universities in the United States, is becoming a kind of monstrous hybrid, an institution that uses public money, our money, for private ends. The attacks on tenure, low wages for staff and outrageous salaries for the upper reaches of the administration, privatization, and the attack on affirmative action, all of these things threaten UT as a public, democratic institution. And all are a part of a pattern in which private interests, a kind of tyranny of the bottom line and of corporate interests, have co-opted an institution founded to serve the public interest. After I have set out what we have been doing in the T.S.E.U., then, Kirsten will talk more about that, and about why we feel only a strong union can reverse this process— this decline— and why we need a union to protect and preserve UT as a democratic, public university. More than that, we feel we need a union because we feel that we need to go beyond the forms of democracy that governed universities in the past.

The TSEU was founded about 15 years ago, and now has more than 10,000 members state-wide. That might seem an impressive number, and given that most of our members are in the lowest paying, and highest turnover jobs, it certainly is; but, given that there are, literally, tens of thousands of employees who work for the state of Texas, it remains only a beginning. The T.S.E.U., to put it simply, is founded on the principle that all employees of the state of Texas have the same employer, and so need one union to

represent them. And, to borrow a phrase from another organization, the T.S.E.U. believes in Jobs with Justice. We believe that it is possible to have both a well run, fiscally responsible public institution, and fairly compensated workers; we believe that public service need not mean severe personal privation, and that, as a democratic organization in a democratic country, it is our duty to help to redress social inequity. It may not be fashionable, but we believe that we can do our jobs better than any market-driven private enterprise.

The first and perhaps most important fact of life for the T.S.E.U. is that Texas is a right to work state. Unlike the situation in more union friendly states, for most unions in Texas there is no end to the organizing: we can't run an intense, short lived campaign for certification, win the vote, and then settle into periodic, more or less routine, contract negotiations. There are benefits to this situation; it keeps us from becoming too complacent. And, because there are no contracts, and no legal strikes, we have had to concentrate on other methods. We demonstrate and organize marches. We deal directly with management as much and as often we can, we pursue lawsuits, and we lobby intensively in the legislature. We work closely with other, like-minded organizations, and we try to keep the interests of the employees of Texas in the forefront of the public's mind. Most importantly, again, we organize, we get people thinking about their jobs, and about their place in the enterprise of democratic government.

We believe in one union that can represent the interests of all Texas workers, but we also believe that unions must be run by their members. This is, of course, a practical as well as a philosophical problem. A few years ago we realized that, given our size, it was becoming increasingly difficult for members to feel they had significant input into the goals and methods of the union. The state of Texas is a big place, and our head quarters in Austin is a long way from, say, El Paso, or even Tyler. Instead of breaking up into several smaller unions, or setting up a traditional shop-floor structure, we chose what we felt was a more creative and dynamic solution: any group of 100 or more TSEU members could form an independent branch, with its own officers and a small budget. As of this date, about 30 of these branches have formed state-wide, in institutions ranging from universities to the state comptrollers' office.

Just after the branch structure was approved at our biannual state-wide membership meeting about 2 years ago, we formed the Instructional Workers Branch here at UT for faculty and graduate students. A Staff branch was formed at the same time. Again, because Texas is a right to work state, we could define our branches in whatever way members felt would best serve their own interests. Many of us had reservations about formally dividing staff from faculty and graduate students in this way— the majority of UT faculty and graduate students are white and male, while the staff are largely minority and include a higher percentage of women. The division of wages and prestige— a division that is too often based on race, class and gender— is, after all, one of the problems we would like to overcome with our one big union strategy. Nevertheless, we felt that each group had different issues, and that we could only benefit from the focus that the branch structure would provide. And over the last few years we have found this to be largely true: each group has been able both to define and pursue its own agenda, and to work together towards common goals.

Several years before the IW Branch was formed the T.S.E.U. had helped to win significant gains for graduate students in Texas. Perhaps most important has been securing our health care program in the late 1980s. In the early 1990s, too, the T.S.E.U played an important role in protecting these benefits, when UT mounted a concerted effort to take them away. And we have worked together for issues that benefited TSEU members at large, too, as well as the citizens of Texas. Over the last five years, however, our branch has concentrated its energies toward winning a full tuition waiver for graduate students, and I would like to finish this discussion by talking for a few minutes about why we feel this is such an important issue, both in terms of how its good for education in Texas, and as an focus for organizing.

One preliminary note: the IW branch at UT has— so far—been largely dominated by graduate students. The reasons for this are complex, and I won't attempt a detailed explanation here. But this has not been

true everywhere: at the University of Houston, for example, the largest group of T.S.E.U. members are faculty, and in the last few years, they have played a crucial role in the fight to protect tenure.

First of all, organizing graduate students is complex and contentious from the start — like herding cats, as someone once said to me in another context. We pride ourselves on our intellectual independence, and we can be individualistic to a fault. Second, there are important differences, for example, between R.A.s on the one hand, and T.A.s. and A.I.s on the other. Some— but not all— Research Assistants have their tuition paid through the grants that fund their work. R.A.s mostly work for one professor for most of their time as graduate students, and they usually work in science labs. Teaching Assistants work for one professor sometimes for only one semester at a time; Assistant Instructors— despite their titles—usually run their own classrooms.

But all graduate students at UT have one key problem in common. A few years ago the University of Texas published a study of Graduate Student finance that found that our so-called financial compensation package was about 30% below the cost of living in Austin. This meant, at the time, that all graduate students must find some other source for about 1/3 of the money they needed to survive. As you might imagine, for a lot of reasons we consider this a conservative estimate; by now, I think it is reasonable to estimate we are paid about half what it takes to live in Austin. And I would like to emphasize the word survive, for we are by no means thriving in a housing market that demands almost 50% of our income just for rent. Tuition itself has reduced our income by another \$200 a month this year. Most graduate students are forced to help finance their education— to finance research and teaching at UT— through loans and second jobs. This situation has gotten so bad that departments are now routinely reporting that more and more applicants are turning down UT in favor of other schools of equal or higher caliber that don't ask their graduate students to help fund their own jobs.

In effect, UT has been borrowing against our future salaries to help finance undergraduate education and corporate research. I will leave the University, next year, owing almost a year's pay to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating board. Traditionally, of course, this system was justified as a kind of apprenticeship: we put off earning money now, and accumulated debt, in exchange for a lifetime of higher salaries. Most schools, over time, have realized that this no longer holds true: for many students in the liberal arts, jobs are far and few between. And even if you can find a position, either within or outside the university, wages are either stagnant, or, in many cases decreasing. Most universities like UT now give tuition waivers, realizing that they have no choice if they want the best students. For a time, Austin's low standard of living helped UT avoid this obvious solution; again, as should be apparent even to visitors, this is no longer the case. To make a long story short, if we were once apprentices, we are now only cheap labor. We are good, even great teachers, and through our research we bring in literally hundreds of millions of dollars in grant money. For all our efforts UT repays us in tens of thousands of dollars in long-term debt. That's why the tuition waiver is both only just, and the one of the best organizing tools we can use.

I would like to finish on a cautiously optimistic note, however. At UT graduate students have divided their strategy into two major areas, and we have had some success in each. Internally, IW member Graduate students have been instrumental in the founding of the Graduate Student Assembly, which has restored our representation and in many cases increased our influence on a wide variety of committees that help to determine the future of UT. IW members also continue to play a role in the on-going fight for affirmative action, and in attempts to curb privatization. Kirsten will talk in more detail about some of these issues.

Externally, through the T.S.E.U. itself, IW members have effectively lobbied the state legislature, helping to protect tenure and, most recently, to win an across the board pay-raise of \$100 a month for all state employees. Thanks to our efforts, the administration has chosen to distribute the pay raise to graduate students in the form of a partial tuition remission; last October 7 we received our first check. UT, of course, never does things the easy way: we are fighting now to insure that this waiver is taken out of fee

bills automatically, rather than distributed through the more expensive form of printed checks. And UT is as of this date still insisting that it call our remission a tuition fellowship, subjecting us to thousands of dollars in unnecessary federal taxes. People who work outside of Universities may find it hard to believe, but, yes, fellowships are now considered a form of taxable income, and so are subject to taxation.

The IW, like the T.S.E.U., is still a long way from having a majority of graduate students and faculty organized. Of the more than 5,000 graduate students employed by UT, for example, we have only about 240 members. Yet I feel we have shown decisively what organizing can do, and what solidarity is all about. I simply can't imagine that I would have stayed at UT all these years without health care; the new waiver program, however belated, will have an impact on the amount of debt I will carry with me to what I optimistically hope will be a new job in academia. Yet UT still seems almost willfully oblivious to the situation of its graduate students: the remission, to cite only one example, does not touch fees— almost half of our bill at this point— and tuition continues to rise. As I have said, we have a long way to go. And, finally, in the largest sense, UT seems determined to destroy its own status as an institution founded to serve the public interest.

### **Part Two—The Bigger Picture: Privatization and Cutbacks [Christensen]**

In the course of our organizing, graduate students and faculty have often asked us what possible benefit there could be to joining a state workers' union in Texas, a right-to-work state in which state employees have no legal right to collective bargaining. Our answer is that benefits to union membership in Texas are tremendous, if unconventional, since we have a de facto, if not legal, right to collective bargaining. This means that numbers, i.e. a surge in union membership, speak loudly both to the legislature and to the university administration.

The victory we achieved in the 1997 legislative session of a \$100/month pay raise for state employees (including graduate student workers) illustrates the possibilities of 'de facto' bargaining. In a union-friendly state, we would have pursued negotiations between administration and union leaders. Since that was not an option, we lobbied, meeting face to face with legislators and their aides to talk about the tuition waiver bill and the state employee pay raise. This lobbying effort was one of the most important things we did, for it gave us a chance to let legislators know who we are: their constituents and hard-working employees, not ivory tower academics. It also brought together at the Capitol graduate students employees, faculty and staff from many different disciplines, as well as from different campuses across the state, including Texas A&M, the University of Houston, and the University of North Texas in Denton. This allowed us to meet others interested in the same issues, and to compare strategies and concerns. The fact that graduate student workers, faculty and staff and even administration are all welcome to join the same union is a particular advantage, for it avoids the possibility of an adversarial relationship between management and workers and allows a unique cooperation.

At the University of Texas at Austin, campus organizations such as the Graduate Student Assembly, Young Texans Against Corporate Welfare, and various faculty caucuses, to name just a few, share many of the concerns of the union and also work to make university employees aware of problems we must confront. But these and other active campus organizations generally have small budgets and address issues on one campus only. Much more important, however, is that they are legally barred from lobbying the legislature, and therefore have a limited reach. TSEU members, on the other hand, can take our concerns directly to lawmakers.

During organizing we also sometimes hear sentiments suggesting that unions have no place in academia. This is nonsense. Professors and instructors, in spite of their very individual research agendas and independent schedules, are workers at this institution. And we all have common interests that must be delineated and defended. That is what we do in the TSEU.

For example, when Texas Senator Teel Bivins drafted a bill in the 1997 session that would have dismantled the professorial tenure system across the state, it passed the Senate Higher Education Committee unopposed and would have gone to the floor for a vote had the union not urged the drafting of a counter-bill in the House that demanded a reasoned review, rather than destruction of the time-honored tenure system, a system that helps guarantee academic freedom. TSEU members of the faculty at the University of Houston were major champions of the counter-bill, which assured that Bivins' bill would not pass this session. Still, anti-tenure sentiment continues in various offices throughout the legislature, and the fight is thus ongoing. Professors can thus definitely benefit from union membership.

The larger university community, including the non-working student body, also desperately needs a union to act as a watch-dog and advocate to help resist the deterioration of affordable student services. One example of such cutbacks is the University Co-op, the University of Texas at Austin's book and school supply source near campus. The Co-op, as its name indicates, was intended from its beginnings to be a non-profit, student-run enterprise, one that would provide course texts and academic books at the lowest possible price. Deplorably, the Co-op now rents space to corporate giant Barnes & Noble, to whom it has recently turned over its general and academic book sections. While students are no doubt attracted by the newly renovated facade and the in-store cafe, we deserve to maintain a store for which profit is not the bottom line. That particular Barnes & Noble is now the only source in Austin for many academic books, leaving some students with little choice in their book search.

This insidious double-edged sword of privatization and its counterpart corporate welfare slices right through public campuses across the country. Simply put, portions of our schools are being sold off to private enterprise, whose profits the universities then subsidize. The University of Texas at Austin and other state universities are supposed to be public institutions of higher education. Yet even a brief stroll through the Texas Union (our 'student' union) reveals the omnipresent attacks on both the 'public' and the 'educational' aspects on campus. The Texas Union is housed in a lovely building constructed by UT alumni during the Great Depression for the dining and recreational use of future students. It was always intended to be student run and owned. However, the first eating establishment one finds upon entering through the main doors is a franchise of a national fast food chain. While the volume of traffic there indicates that students may like burgers and fries, any other benefits to students are negligible. The franchise was installed in the Union in spite of a 1993 student referendum rejecting it. To add insult to injury, the Union Board charges the restaurant only ten percent of its profits for rent on the space, a price far below competitive market rates. Similarly, a private food service organization that runs numerous national fast food eateries in the Union, the business school cafeteria, and various other food resources around campus, pays only seven percent of its profits for space rental. Our \$29/semester union fees could no doubt go to better good than subsidizing private enterprises and enhancing corporate profits. In pre-privatization days, when the university ran the food options in the Union under the name Union Dining Services, students had avenues for input into the food offerings there. Now that it is privatized, we have no say.

Sadly, even the many students opposed to this privatization often feel that they have no choice but to spend their hard-earned money at these corporate money-makers. In fact, with the exception of the handful of union convenience stores sprinkled across campus, there are no student-owned and -run eating facilities on campus. We should not have to walk off campus just to have a lunch that does not offend the conscience.

Finally, in one of the most concrete attacks on public education on the University of Texas at Austin campus, the Texas Union board recently voted to cut the Texas Union Film Series. Andy Smith, Union Board President, argued that the series, in spite of the Union Board's alleged best efforts, had continued to be an unsuccessful "revenue center." (These best efforts, incidentally, never included even a chalkboard in front of the Union to advertise the films, nor a well-advertised meeting with students to discuss the fate of

the program). With the repeated use of the phrase "revenue center," the Union Board members made clear that they feel that the University of Texas has no more challenging goal than profit.

During the Union Board meeting in which the cessation of funding for the Film Series was announced, there was not a single mention from the Board of the Series's singular success as an educational tool, bringing films to campus from the far reaches of the globe, thus introducing students to a remarkable range of cultures and languages. The Series has also been instrumental in the education of many important Austin film makers. Mr. Smith claimed that the films in the Series had been poorly attended. If he was comparing attendance at an art film from Iran with an average Friday-night action flick, he was probably right. But a commitment to the educational value of the program would acknowledge that final assessment can not possibly be measured in mere dollars. We do not need undemocratic, purely financial values determining the fate of our education. Apparently, we can no longer count on the university administration itself to uphold educational values. The Texas State Employees Union can take the concerns of the various student activist groups on campus to lawmakers, to demand that this institution stay private and truly committed to its educational mandate.

The larger university community absolutely needs the activism of the TSEU. The fight is on-going and crucial. But we need more members. We have built up our membership in the Instructional Workers branch to close to 300, and, along with other TSEU members across the state, this little group has made remarkable strides. But this is nowhere near the membership needed to address adequately the mammoth concerns of Texas universities. We will therefore continue to organize and to be loud, for we envision a union in which graduate students and faculty can work together in solidarity with members of all sectors of the university.

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