



McLaughlin, L. (2001). Organizing for change: GSEAC/UAW. *Workplace*, 7, 149-151.

ORGANIZING FOR CHANGE:

GSEAC/UAW

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Here at the University of Washington, academic student employees began the process of unionization for the same reason that other workers—academic and otherwise—seek collective bargaining relationships with their employers: we realized that without collective bargaining, we lacked a meaningful voice in the terms and conditions of our employment. In the spring of 1998, several forums took place where graduate teaching assistants gathered to discuss the relationship of our wages, benefits and working conditions to those of teaching assistants at our peer institutions. What emerged from those conversations was an interdisciplinary group of activists convinced that only with an organization independent from the administration—a union with collective bargaining rights—would we be able to make substantive, lasting changes to the terms and conditions of our work. Since then, we have become GSEAC/UAW, a recognized union of graduate and undergraduate teaching assistants, readers, graders and tutors. We won recognition last December, and are currently in the process of negotiating our first contract with the UW administration.

In the fall of 1999, the Graduate Student Employee Action Coalition (GSEAC) made the decision to affiliate with the United Auto Workers. Because we already had support in many departments all over campus, in January 2000, we began a card drive and, ten weeks later, filed cards representing over 80% of the bargaining unit with the Public Employee Relations Commission (PERC). By the time of the card drive, undergraduates as well as graduate students were joining GSEAC/UAW because we became aware that many worked in the same jobs as graduate students: as teaching assistants, readers, graders, and tutors. Although PERC accepted the cards, in March 2000 the university refused to agree to PERC jurisdiction. As Washington State has no legislation that compels the university to recognize our union, we demanded that the university respect our right to collectively bargain by voluntarily recognizing GSEAC/UAW as the bargaining agent. Their refusal agitated our membership, and we began planning to increase the pressure on the administration the following fall.

During the card drive and in the following months, we saw the transformative power of organizing in changes to the academic and political climate on campus. Face-to-face organizing not only built a solid informed membership who began preparing for a possible strike in the Fall of 2000, but it also created communities in departments where workers tended not to know each other, and connected workers across disciplines in unprecedented ways. By the beginning of the Fall Quarter, leaders and activists in virtually all departments across campus—from Atmospheric Sciences to Zoology—had laid the groundwork for a successful recognition strike if the university continued to refuse to recognize and bargain with the union.

As the academic year of 1999-2000 came to a close, membership had increased since the initial card drive, and members were getting more and more agitated by the university's intransigence. 1200 put their names on a public statement calling for the university to immediately recognize GSEAC/UAW and begin

collective bargaining. Meanwhile, the university responded to the overwhelming majority by moving to shore up the "shared governance" system by creating a new "TA Roles and Responsibilities Committee" and allocating funds to restore some of the health care benefits that had been cut several years before. These attempts to undermine unionization primarily succeeded in agitating the membership even further as members saw each move as more evidence of the university's lack of respect for their decision to unionize.

TAs, readers, graders and tutors came back to campus in the Fall of 2000 ready to fight to win voluntary recognition. Halfway through the quarter, 1000 members voted to go on strike if the university continued to refuse to recognize and bargain with the union. At the same time, the rest of the campus grew increasingly aware of the recognition struggle and gathered forces behind the union. During the course of the quarter, the Graduate and Professional Student Senate, the Associated Students of the University of Washington, and the Faculty Senate all passed resolutions supporting the unionization of TAs, readers, graders and tutors. Members from the other campus unions rallied in support as well, educating their members about the campaign and offering picket line support and strike hardship fund donations. We began conversations with student activist groups on campus, and leaders from groups such as MEChA and Students against Sweatshops pointed to the struggle for academic student employee unionization as a move towards a more comprehensive democratization of the university.

In addition to the campus coalitions that formed in support of our collective bargaining rights, as the quarter progressed we saw more and more evidence of the relationships between our situation and other connected struggles in Seattle, Washington State, and the national labor movement. In Seattle itself, the King County Labor Council, Seattle Union Now, and the Washington office of the AFL-CIO all actively worked to help us put pressure on the university for voluntary recognition. At the same time that we were gearing up to strike, so was the Newspaper Guild, the union of workers from the two daily newspapers in Seattle: the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* and *Seattle Times*. SPEEA, the union representing Boeing engineers, had won a strike earlier in the year, and so offered a joint training for picket captains from the Newspaper Guild and GSEAC/UAW late in the fall. Our connected struggles together demonstrated the increasing demands of white-collar workers for the same kind of collective bargaining relationships that other groups of workers have traditionally used to gain a voice in their conditions of employment. In fact, one factor influencing our decision to affiliate with the UAW was the union's long-standing tradition of representing white-collar workers; as a part of the Technical, Office, and Professional division we joined over 100,000 other members who work in positions such as lawyers, writers, health care professionals and academic student employees across the US, Canada, and Puerto Rico.

In other ways, we saw our fight for collective bargaining rights connected to the campaign of migrant agricultural workers in the apple fields of Eastern Washington, who share our legal position in Washington State of neither being included in nor excluded from collective bargaining laws. Also, in October 2000, John Sweeney, president of the AFL-CIO, traveled throughout the Northwest US criticizing the practices of Labor Ready and other anti-union companies that employ contingency workers. As academic contingency workers, we are part of that larger group whose positions are more vulnerable to fluctuations of the market because our jobs are temporary and generally not full-time. In the process of organizing academic student employees, activists on this campus and others develop and use models for organizing the temporary and contingent workforce that can strengthen the labor movement, especially in areas of employment that haven't traditionally been unionized. The current struggles of workers employed by Labor Ready and those in the agricultural industry do the same, and so further the causes of social justice in our communities.

As a result of this community solidarity and our mobilized membership, hours before our strike deadline we won voluntary recognition and a process by which we could, for the first time, negotiate our terms and conditions of employment with the university administration. At this point, we are currently in the process

of negotiating our first contract with the administration, and hope to have a full agreement before the end of this academic year. Thus far, the combination of mobilized campus-wide support in the bargaining unit and campus, community and political solidarity have proven to be powerful forces in changing the structure of the institution so that we can participate in defining the terms and conditions of our work.

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