October GSO Meeting

Call to order: 5:02

GSOC: Graduate Student Organizing Committee

Sara Hakimzadeh- English

Rachel Brickner- MFA English

Jordan/Evan????- English

George Weddington- Sociology

Jeff Cech- United Steelworkers

**INTRODUCTIONS**

**Sara**: I support the GSOC for several reasons. There are structural and cultural trends in US of declining state aid and increasing tuition, which means more graduate students are being employed. The University depends on graduate students to teach. In some schools graduate student health insurance was lost, and this is why many schools are unionizing. Graduate student workers are entitled to fair working conditions. A union would allow for collective bargaining where students could negotiate class size, workspace, benefits, annual salary increases, vacation time, paternity and maternity leave. It could also set up a grievance procedure that does not go through University administration. A union will provide more autonomy in determining our working conditions. This is also part of a broader movement for workers right equality.

**Rachel:** I was offered a fully funded Ta-ship for 3 years, which is the duration of my program. However, not all graduate students are in position where they have guaranteed funding. In English, there are only two fully funded MFA spots in my genre. Without funding, this can be a stressful process where you spend more time figuring out how to stay in program rather than your work. The benefits of full funding for me were never worrying about funding which allowed a certain type of progress with work which led to a fellowship. This allowed me to have my work recognized. Because of that it is my duty to fight and ask for the same rights for my colleagues. Non-funded students often have to TA outside of the field which can be uncomfortable because they do not have training to teach and grade in these outside classes. Also with issues of sexual harassment we do not the type of legal recourse we deserve.

Jordan=Evan???: When is experience in your field a liability rather than an asset. In English Composition. Last year in a department teacher training workshop a friend recommended to keep my head down and just get through it. A lot of people in workshop did not like professional training. The workshop it was referred to as working within the walls of whiteness. We decided to take dramatic action- we wrote an essay. We thought if we wrote it down the department would respond. Our concerns were

1. Teachers are equal and have as much academic freedom regardless of their status.
2. Different bodies will teach differently—they require academic freedom.
3. Mentors at the teacher training should be diversified and the ways they are selected should be transparent.

We took it to our department and our concerns were not addressed. It was even indicated that those who played nice could be mentors next year. This meeting transformed into discussion of our possible activity in labor force. The teacher training workshop mentors are chosen behind closed doors without an application process, there is no transparency and no diversity. This mentorship means money, a course release, and a CV line. When is experience a liability rather than an asset? When you speak up for academic freedom, transparencies in teaching process and diversity.

**George**: How many have felt they have had a grievance. Did things work better because we had an advisor that had our back? There is gap, the union will create a stop gap where your situation- working and learning conditions- are not at the whim of whoever the department head is. Things may be great if you are in their favor, but alternatively conditions may be terrible. The union makes sure we are protected. An organization represented by the fellow graduate students in ways that are favorable equally to all graduate students. It is important we keep in mind that it isn’t about us individually- not everyone’s situation is good even if yours is great. And we often do not know what is going on in other departments.

**Jeff**: The Steelworker Union helps with the mechanics of unionization. This is your community and your issues. The perception that a union is an outside third party that inserts itself between two groups to bargain is incorrect. The United Steelworkers (USW) gives unions more autonomy and a stronger democratic structure than most unions. The union would create an organization of graduate student workers led by elected graduate students that work with the community to develop and improve working conditions. Through the PA State Labor Board we would hold an election. There are several steps, right now we are at the conversation step- identify supporters, build a committee, identify issues, and develop conversation. Once we have had enough conversations and see support, then second step is collect union authorization cards, this may also be a petition. Once a majority of graduate students sign the cards then they go to labor board. The board checks the cards with the grad student list at University and if the list is big enough then an election is held. There are two ways to hold an election, (1) mail everyone a ballot, or (2) set up a physical voting booth. If approved then the board approves and the University is required to bargain with the graduate student representatives on contract. You elect bargaining representatives from your peers. The important thing is about the conversation so we will open it up to questions now.

**QUESTION AND ANSWER**

**Q**: Who does graduate student workers include?

**A**: The PA labor board has policy against overfracturing. Graduate student workers will include the broadest group possible- any graduate student who receives a paycheck from the University and their paycheck is tied to their schooling.

**Q:** How many graduate students are there?

**A**: 2500-3000. We don’t know if anyone actually has a list. We have talked to the former TA services director, and she has tried to get a list and has been refused. There is an issue of transparency—why? We based our estimate on the University education report for federal funding. It is important we are going out and physically talking to each department because we do not have a list. With a union the University will be required to reveal everyone who is in the union.

**Q**: Explain the steps of the process.

**A**: Conversation to determine if there is enough support. We want to have as many one-on-one conversations as possible and aim for around 65% support. If there is then the card signing stage. This takes time because of the number of graduate student workers.

**Q**: In terms of eligibility for card signing- in-state, out-of-state, out-of-country- who can sign a card and whose voice is counted?

**A**: Every single graduate student worker has right regardless of immigration status or physical location.

**Q**: Some students have VISAs that say they are not allowed to take any political action- does this place them at risk- if it goes through without their involvement are they at risk?

**A**: I am not a lawyer so I cannot give a definitive answer. We do have lawyers so we can get answer. Leaning toward not a political action.

**Q**: Do you have a website?

**A**: Pittgradunion.org. Literature on the table.

**Q**: For unions often you hear union and nonunion workers? Are there opt-in opt-out opportunities?

**A**: In the US you cannot be forced to join a labor union. If there is a contract it will cover all employees. Regardless if you are a member you will still benefit from the bargained contract. There are ways to avoid membership.

**Q**: From a student’s perspective what are the potential pitfalls?

**A**: Talking to the other representatives, we have not encountered any. You are legally protected from any retaliation for attempting to form or being part of a union. There will be things that are entailed- for example union dues. These are after the contract is ratified and voted. If the contract is voted up (all graduate student workers vote) then it goes into effect. The union dues will be 1.45% of your gross income. You can expect to get that as a raise at least! The union might mean more work for department heads. A study from Rutgers showed that unionizing improved the relationship between graduate student workers and advisors. Unions will not put you in situation where you are worse off than before and you each have a voice.

**Q**: Is anyone on payroll considered- would undergraduates be included?

**A**: In PA the definition of the group decided by labor board- so unsure. I think administrative classification would separate them out.

**Q**: Is everyone covered whether you pay or not? Yes. Doesn’t this lead to a serious freeriding problem?

**A**: For most part people still join- moral mutual aid. If you are not a member you do not get a vote- for officer, for contract. There is a shared sense of responsibility to leave things better. This is also a small percentage to have access to legal lawyers. It is also important to join because the University knows how many people are members- so if the union has few members they do not have the power at the bargaining table.

**Q**: Based on experiences at other Universities can you give examples of what they gained from bargaining? Mental health, illness, maternity/paternity?

**A**: At the University of Connecticut the graduate students unionized due to exorbitant student fees, and taxable health insurance. Through unionizing they bargained for actual health insurance, paid maternity leave, lower student fees, and transgender bathrooms. Another example is a University had a casket tax which was charged to all international students and paid for a student to be returned to their country if the student passes away— the casket tax was bargained out. Other things you can bargain for a non-family bereavement, publishing rights- think internally about the things you would like to change.

**Q**: If you are a member you pay the percentage, but does a non-member pay a smaller percentage?

**A**: There are several types of contracts. Unions bargain usually a closed shop- if you opt-out you still benefit from the union and you have to pay an agency fee, which is less than membership dues. Typically around 80% (1.16%) of dues- depends on the University. There is no way to pay 0%. We already pay fees for services we do not benefit from that are geared toward undergraduates. Campaign has made it easier to communicate across departments- already seen this is a cultural shift.

**Q**: Principal investigators may say they will not fund students in a union? It was implied that we already get a lot of benefits and they would not be happy about it.

**A**: If there is any backlash from PIs or faculty the University policy on institutional violence requires the department to take this issue to the Title IX office. There is no third party- the Title IX office is part of the University. Currently graduate students have no third party. Departments now HAVE to submit ALL grievances to Title IX office. Following unionization PIs will pay you the exact same amount and the dues are taken from your paycheck. There are state and federal labor laws and if issues arise you can file charges and the United Steelworkers will provide free legal representation.

**Q**: How are you going to set the # of hours to work per week, which varies between departments?

**A**: The union is more for placing a floor, not a ceiling- can only go up depending on bargaining, department funds, grants, etc. Will be a hard contract to bargain because of all of the departments.

**Q**: How often do we negotiate a new contract?

**A**: That is part of what you negotiate. New contracts are typically 3 years to start, and once it matures and you have a really good contracts then 5 years.

**Q**: How are fellowships handled?

**A**: Will be negotiated, but possibly, must be nonemployee for greater than one year to be considered out of contract.

**Q**: If the Union establishes a University wide base pay, then each department gets to determine how much work that money is worth, some graduate student workers may teach 2x for same amount of work- adjusted base pay does not necessarily help us.

**A**: It is up to the committee to decide what is important and bargain those conditions. Everything is addressable. Not only department who has this issue. Options include bargaining funding for a one-to-one job assignment, or increased pay for additional work.

**Q**: Is this reasonable because it sounds like a massive reallocation of funds? It sounds unrealistic, it can affect graduate student enrollment and undergraduate course offerings.

**A**: Set up terms so the University does not overstep bounds. Setting up boundaries, and making sure not being overextended so you have room to do your own research. University only offers us the lowest they can for the most work. Assume there is room for improvement. We don’t know the answer because we haven’t been through the process. We want concrete benefits, but also a way to reverse trends of corporatization of the University.

Many graduate students want to enter academia. This is the beginning of advocating for your position in a way that values scholarship and not just bureaucrats and administrators. Most courses are taught by visiting scholars, adjuncts and graduate students.

**Q**: Say we have 51% support for the union. What stops Pitt from bargaining as two units?

**A**: PA law prevents fracturing.

**Q**: How is the current effort being funded and how does that change once funded?

**A**: The graduate student volunteers are not being paid. The United Steelworkers Union have provided resources, for example, buttons and fliers. Currently the costs are being subsidized by the current workers of United Steelworkers union. If we unionize, half of our dues come back to us and the other half go to the United Steelworkers.

**Q**: Timeline- how long will it take to card and voting process?

**A**: Goals: card drive beginning of next semester. Committee has doubled in size. Average between 65-75% that would sign union card and vote yes. Dependent upon grad students- what’s our timeline- if you want this go and talk to people. It won’t happen if we do not have conversations within our department.

You can invite GSOC and the United Steelworkers to talk to your department. Representatives- you must talk about this with your departments so we can decide at the November 29th meeting if the A&S GSO will support the union effort.

Meeting Adjourn at 6:40pm