

SHOULD GSU AFFILIATE WITH A LARGER UNION?

Graduate Students United, your grad student union, could join a larger union federation, in order to pool our resources and gain strength in numbers. To have your say, join GSU and vote in our upcoming online referendum. Write gsu@riseup.net or visit www.uchicagogsu.org.

affiliation options:

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS

The AAUP is the leading professional body in the US advocating for faculty and grad students in the areas of academic freedom, shared governance, and union rights. It represents unionized faculty at 57 universities, some of whom are jointly affiliated with AAUP and AFT. Graduate student members have all rights and privileges accorded to faculty members, including the right to hold office and to vote in national elections. In recent years the *AAUP has done a great deal to defend the workplace interests of graduate students*. Most importantly, in 2009 the Association approved a Recommended Institutional Regulation on Graduate Student Employees that provides administrators with a set of grad student job appointment guidelines.

SERVICE EMPLOYEES INTERNATIONAL UNION

The SEIU is a powerful international union. Advantages of affiliating with the SEIU include access to their extensive legal resources and training, as well as paid staff for an organizing campaign. *SEIU already represents workers here at the U of C*, giving them experience in dealing with the administration. The dues that we would pay upon affiliation are not yet set, but one proposal is that workers would pay monthly dues of two and a half hours wage. Members who are not working would not have to pay dues, nor would dues be charged to anybody until a contract with the U of C administration is in place. Some people, however, might have reservations about SEIU's national politics, which have been controversial in recent years, including several battles with other unions.

AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS - ILLINOIS FEDERATION OF TEACHERS

For graduate students employed as teachers, the AFT-IFT might seem a natural choice. IFT represents about 100,000 education employees in Illinois, and it recently ran successful contract campaigns with the Graduate Employees Organizations at UIUC and UIC. Along with the UAW, *the AFT is one of the largest representative of graduate student employees in North America*. It has important experience with the specific challenges involved in graduate student organizing. Although it is a smaller organization than SEIU, it is larger than the AAUP or the IWW; it has significant clout in shaping national educational policy, and it has significant financial resources to devote to organizing. AFT-IFT has also expressed a willingness to work together with AAUP in a joint campaign.



UNITED AUTO WORKERS

The UAW is another large union, boasting over 500,000 members. In addition, *the UAW attractive probably has the most experience in organizing graduate students at private universities*. UAW famously negotiated a contract for New York University grad students in 2000, and has also organized students at universities such as Columbia and Cornell, while also serving students at public institutions such as the University of California and Massachusetts systems. Dues under affiliation with UAW would be charged after a contract with the administration is signed, and would likely amount to 1.15% of our wages, with approximately half of that remaining with GSU for local organizing.

INDUSTRIAL WORKERS OF THE WORLD

The IWW differs from the AFT-IFT and the SEIU in its emphasis on organizing even if its members do not obtain formal recognition or a contract. *If GSU seeks and fails to obtain formal recognition, it is possible that the AFT-IFT or SEIU would withdraw support, while the IWW would not*. Also unlike with the AFT-IFT or SEIU, GSU members would begin paying IWW dues immediately upon affiliation (rather than after signing our first contract); these dues are also lower than other unions' dues, and GSU would keep 70% of these dues to spend as it chooses--giving GSU significant financial autonomy from the very start of the campaign. The IWW is the smallest of our potential affiliates; but it has a large group of experienced volunteer organizers who have agreed to help with GSU's campaign.

REMAINING INDEPENDENT?

Since its inception, GSU has operated as an unaffiliated union representing graduate students at the U of C. As an independent organization, GSU has been free to adopt a democratic, non-hierarchical governance structure and has been able to focus on those issues of greatest concern to its membership. With this approach, we earned a pay increase for graduate student teachers in 2008. At other times, however, the administration not taken GSU seriously, and GSU has always been resource-poor. Affiliation with a larger union would give GSU access to financial, legal, and organizational resources that it could not muster on its own. Affiliation will also send a strong signal to University administrators and is likely to significantly increase GSU's profile on campus and in the media. However, affiliation may also entail a sacrifice in flexibility--we may need to change our organizational structure; a larger union may expect GSU's support for the organization's larger political agenda; and no outside union can match GSU's own knowledge of the local situation.

AFFILIATION FAQs:

Are grad students really “workers” eligible to form unions?

Since many grad students work for wages that in turn pay for their own sustenance, there is no doubt that grad students are workers. While any group of workers may form a union, the real question is whether the workers’ employer officially recognizes the union as an agent for collective bargaining. Grad students of private universities must either be voluntarily recognized by the administration of their own university, or through the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). Unfortunately, voluntary recognition from the university may prove difficult, and in 2004 the Bush-appointed NLRB overturned a 2000 decision that private university graduate students may be considered workers. A more labor-friendly White House means that chances are good this decision will be overturned in favor of graduate student workers.



Have other grad students formed unions?

Graduate students across North America, including those at private universities, have formed unions for the purpose of winning collective bargaining rights. Many of these unions stay in close contact with one another and have formed a Coalition of Graduate Employee Unions which provides

many resources regarding graduate student unions on their website www.cgeu.org.



What have been their experiences when they affiliate with large, national unions?

In most cases, local grad student movements have benefited greatly from affiliation, gaining valuable resources and organizing expertise. In a few cases, students have felt that their new affiliate did not show enough respect for the local union’s autonomy; and in other cases, students have been disappointed that their affiliates have withdrawn support after failing to win union elections. On the other hand, these union elections might not have taken place at all without the outside union’s help



Would it affect student/faculty relations if we affiliated with an outside organization to represent grad students?



Hopefully, only for the better. Most faculty understand that a grad student union gives students the ability to speak collectively alongside faculty, and not against them. Moreover, if we affiliated with AFT-IFT or AAUP, then we would be joining organizations that already have large numbers of faculty as members. Nonetheless, we should also acknowledge that occasionally a faculty member might be found to be mistreating a student--often without realizing it. A union can help students to address such situations without fearing repercussions from the faculty members in question.



Does GSU need to affiliate in order to be recognized by the administration?

No. The administration is free at any time to recognize GSU and begin the process of collective bargaining. But the administration is unlikely to do this without feeling pressure from a powerful, well-organized union. We can attempt to exert this level of pres-

sure purely by relying on our internal organization; but the experience of other grad student unions suggests that our prospects are more promising if we have the support of a large national union.



How much would dues be if we affiliate?

This depends on the organizing strategy of the union we affiliate with. Typically grad students do not pay dues to a union they have affiliated with until the union has signed its first contract (and won a pay raise for its members). Until then, dues would remain at their current level as set by GSU (\$5 per year).



Would GSU maintain its autonomy?

For the most part, yes. Every potential affiliate has emphasized that GSU would remain in charge of its internal affairs. It is true that different unions have different organizational norms which we might be required to respect. At the same time, we would become full members of the organization we affiliate with, with the right to participate in its national or international democratic process.