Graduate students plan unionization

Maria Hickey
The Daily Iowan

In its Tuesday meeting, the first of the summer, the Campaign to Organize Graduate Students discussed strategy for unionization.

"While we have a lot of desires, our first and foremost goal is a union, above and beyond all else," said Mark Stensen, chairman of the community relations committee.

COGS formed last spring and is working to gain information about unionization. They hope to gain health-care and day-care benefits and other improvements in working conditions.

Unionization involves a complicated legal process with the Public Employment Relations Board and the UI. A petition from the board which determines how COGS define themselves as a bargaining unit must be completed.

Once the UI has accepted the bargaining unit, COGS must gain "representation certification." This involves a show of interest from at least 30 percent of the bargaining unit on a form provided and verified by the board. If the petition is accepted, a notice of election would be posted.

COGS must receive certification by Dec. 15 in order to bargain with the UI next year.

COGS must also decide whether to affiliate with a union, and if so, which union. Four of the five unions being considered are affiliated with AFL-CIO: American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees; American Federation of Teachers; Communication Workers of America; and Service Employees International Union. Iowa United Professional is the only union under consideration which is not AFL-CIO affiliated.

"We want to be able to make an informed decision, not jump into anything," said co-chairwoman Julie Monroe.

COGS members voted to meet with Service Employees International Union on July 9, the day before a training session with the City Federation, of which SEIU is a part.

COGS hammering out details of bargaining unit

Maria Hickey
The Daily Iowan

A bargaining unit is still being hammered out after a meeting Monday between representatives of the Campaign to Organize Graduate Students / Service Employees International Union Local 150, the UI administration, the Iowa state Board of Regents and the Public Employees Relations Board.

"It does look as if we may be able to resolve issues at the next meeting," said COGS / SEIU spokeswoman Debbie Blake.

Plans to hold a union election in December were deterred when the groups involved were unable to define the bargaining unit at a meeting held in Des Moines on Oct. 15. The election is now slated for spring, which pushes the date back for negotiations.

Dean of the Graduate College Leslie Sims said the meeting was an opportunity to work through the classifications of graduate student jobs and the groups which should and should not be included.

COGS / SEIU Local 150 hopes to include as many of the graduate students as possible in the unit. Members have been visiting teaching assistants in departments throughout the UI to gain support.

"We're continuing with the philosophy that we want the unit to be as inclusive as possible," Blake said.

The next meeting will be held in Iowa City on Nov. 23.
TA salary increase granted

Jim Snyder
The Daily Iowan

UI graduate teaching and research assistants will receive an average a 5 percent stipend increase next year, Dean of the Graduate College Leslie Sims said Monday.

In addition, graduate assistants will receive a $500 health insurance allowance, he said. Graduate assistants currently have to pay for approximately 35 percent of their premium costs. However, the move lowers that price tag to 30 percent of the cost for coverage.

The increases are the first step in a three-year plan to raise graduate stipends and lessen their cost for health-care coverage.

This spring the Legislature voted to allocate $350,000 to provide additional support for graduate assistants’ health insurance and passed salary increases that included a 3 percent stipend raise.

The UI will provide the remaining 2 percent stipend increase from its own budget.

The announcement came less than a month after graduate students voted down a Campaign to Organize Graduate Students initiative to unionize.

Despite the increases, graduate student and COGS member Sara Cody said there is still a need for a union.

"We need more than 5 percent," she said. "It helps my ability to buy books. Maybe I can pay one month's rent with it, but it's a drop in the bucket."

Cody said the stipends should be increased by 25 percent across the board.

The increase in the health-care allowance is also inadequate, she said. A union would better enable graduate students

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to bargain for more comprehensive coverage, Cody added.

Cody said she had a thyroid condition last year that wouldn't have been covered by the university's health plan. She had to borrow approximately $1,000 from her grandparents to pay for the care she received.

Sims said the support the Legislature demonstrated this year is an indication that there is no need for a union.

"We believed that we could convince the state to address the needs of graduate education without a union," he said. "I think this confirms it was a reasonable way to get needs addressed."

He was confident the funding to finish out the program would be there for the next two years. In 1993-94, UI Teaching Assistants ranked eighth and research assistants ranked ninth among Big Ten schools based on average stipends. The plan will raise both ranks to third.

That means TA stipends on average will be raised $1,000 and research assistants average stipends will be increased by $1,500 over the three years of the plan.

The initiative also calls for providing graduate assistants with at least 80 percent of the single premium cost. Sims said he would like that number to be even higher. He added that university officials are also looking into ways coverage could be expanded.

Daily Iowan, May 10, 1994

Tuition waivers untouched

For now, tuition waivers for graduate students will remain tax exempt.

By Scott Lester
The Daily Iowan

After taking a stand and fighting Congress, graduate students all over the country will still receive tax-exempt status on tuition waivers.

A bill debated by the U.S. House of Representatives that would eliminate a section of the U.S. Tax Code - currently making tuition waivers for graduate students tax-exempt - was not expected to pass and UI graduate students will continue to receive their protection.

Co-President for COGS John Kissam said his group encouraged local members to call and e-mail their state representatives. They set up phone banks and lobbied Congress in an effort to defeat the bill.

COGS participated in a nationwide effort with the Coalition of Graduate Employee Union and has been actively protesting the issue since the House Ways and Means Committee proposed their budget in early June.

Kissam said it was definitely worth the work.

"We were thrilled about the outcome.

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and the collective action around the nation to preserve this important feature of the tax code," Kissam said.

The Tuition Waiver Exclusion, Section 117 (d), which is a Senate version of the bill, protects from taxation the waivers of tuition costs for graduate students that are granted by colleges and universities in return for teaching and research services.

Doug Wagner, press secretary for Rep. Jim Leach, said he supports the issue of taxpayer relief in higher education and the bill "survived intact."

This provision benefits not only the eligible graduate students; it recognizes the importance, both intellectually and economically, of their contributions to the learning process," Leach said in a statement.

Tuition waivers are not widely given at the UI, but some departments provide graduate employees free classes in exchange for working at the UI, either as a teacher or a research assistant. There are about 2500 UI graduate students who fall into this category.

Associate Dean of the Graduate College James Jakobson said he strongly supports tax exemption for graduate students and is relieved the situation has blown over.

Jakobson said the bill was confusing because of its broad definition. It was unknown who would have been eligible for a waiver. It was a near miss for graduate students, he said.

Kissam said this is an important step down the road, and now their focus is on receiving full tuition waivers for every graduate student.

Daily Iowan, July 31, 1997
Two resolutions written by UI grad students will be voted on by the UE national convention.

By Megan E. Jensen
The Daily Iowan

A local union is attempting to take a national stance against the exploitation of prison labor with a push from UI graduate-student members. Delegates from United Electrical District 11 unanimously voted Sunday to pass two resolutions concerning the rights of workers as framed by UE Local 996 Campaign to Organize Graduate Students, a member of the district. The resolutions will become part of the union's national code if they are adopted at the union's 66th national convention in Pittsburgh in September.

"A large number of industries capitalize on cheap prison labor," said Rob Russell, the COGS president. "They pay low wages to get their products produced."

The university has taken advantage of prison labor by purchasing furniture for such buildings as the IMU from the Iowa Prison Industries, he said.

The first resolution calls for a collective effort by the UE districts and locals to aid in the dismantling of prison-industrial complexes. The resolution calls for its members to oppose any legislation that enables private companies to further exploit prison workers as cheap labor. It also stipulates that imprisoned laborers receive the same benefits as workers who are not jailed, including current wages, Social Security credit, and the right to collectively organize and bargain.

"They were both good resolutions that represent the spirit of what our division fights for," said Carl Rosen, the president of the UE Radio & Machine Workers of America District Council 11.

The resolution also criticized the disproportionate number of blacks in the prison system. Blacks make up 12 percent of the country's population but account for 81 percent of the prison population, according to the resolution. The disproportionate number of blacks engaged in prison labor is a reminder of the slavery Southern blacks suffered in the years following the Civil War, the resolution states.

The second resolution drafted by COGS seeks U.S. economy for the people. The resolution asks the UE convention members to support the Labor Party and campaigns for new federal tax and spending priorities. The resolution also asks its members to "create an alternative globalization based on a worldwide fellowship."

"We are working on an alternate vision to the economy — people are put at the forefront, not the needs of the large corporation," Russell said.

Rosen said he expects the resolutions to be "well received" by delegates in September.

E-mail reporter Megan Jensen at megan-jensen@uiowa.edu

Daily Iowan, June 25, 2001

Childcare costs hitting UI grad students

By Phil Davidson
THE DAILY IOWAN

David Correa is a 19-year-old UI junior. He is a part-time graduate assistant at the university. He is also a PhD student in molecular biology.

David Correa, UI graduate assistant

Correa works roughly half his week as Mr. Mom, bringing up his two toddler daughters at home. Of the time, the UI graduate assistant in geography juggles his studies and his own course work.

And while he loves being with his children, he said, he would like to have more time to devote to his students — that all depends on whether COGS, the graduate-student union, can reach a deal with the university concerning more childcare coverage.

Correa said, "I'm not as available to students as I would be if I had access to high-quality childcare."

Approximately 135 is applied for funding, which is disbursed on a need-based system that rests on parental earnings.

In comparison, graduate research and teaching assistants at the University of Michigan received up to $9,554 for childcare this semester.

Lise Vandervort, the president of the Campaign to Organize Graduate Students, UE Local 996, said the union is pushing for childcare coverage for all graduate employees with children as well as doubling the amount of funding to $1,500 per semester.

Even over a month," he said. University students draw from an $88,000 pot from the general fund for childcare, said Jane Holland, the Family Services coordinator. Graduate employees at the University of Michigan and the University of Wisconsin, in comparison, receive funding from reserves of $80,000 and $400,000 respectively, she said. These Big Ten institutions use different sources on top of administrative funding, varying from segregated student government fees to special grants, she said.

COGS plans to hold a rally today on the T. Anne Cleary Walkway, west of the Pappajohn Business Building, to support more childcare coverage and implementing a first-ever tuition remission plan for the grad students. The UI is the only Big Ten school that does not provide some sort of remission for graduate assistants.

Daily Iowan, December 3, 2002
Suit against COGS dismissed

By Ben Fornell

A suit filed by the state Board of Regents intended to keep employment records out of the hands of the UI graduate student union was dismissed Monday, and the issue will be settled through arbitration.

But the Campaign to Organize Graduate Students has filed a complaint with the Iowa Public Employee Relations Board contending that the UI never intended to honor that part of the contract when it first signed it.

Sixth District Court Judge Douglas Russell said in his ruling that the university must honor the terms of its contract with COGS and have the dispute — which centers on how to comply with federal student-privacy laws while also providing contractually mandated data to unions — resolved in arbitration.

COGS President Gwen Gruber called the UI's position a "union-busting effort."

COGS needs access to information about how graduate students are being paid so the union can verify that its agreement with the UI is being honored, she said.

"We used that information to defend the contract," she said. "The contract should be a sacred kind of covenant."

The UI contends that it must follow the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act, which does not allow for anything more than basic directory information, including that of graduate teaching assistants, to be released to anyone — including unions.

"We had attempted to resolve it at negotiations," said Kevin Ward, the executive associate director of UI Human Resources, who was actively involved in the bargaining.

COGS has produced a memo from Ward dated six days before the contract was signed that states the UI "cannot provide the union with salary or other appointment information as required."

I believe I made it clear to them that we would need to find a way to comply with [the privacy act]," Ward said.

He met with members of the Iowa Public Employee Relations Board Monday who will try to resolve the dispute. Gruber said that COGS is not looking for a punishment for the UI.

"Hopefully we can find a way to work together on this," she said.

The UI allows members of the union to give their permission for pay data to be released.

"As they provide us with that permission, we will provide the information to COGS," Ward said.

Regent Robert Downer said he does not agree with the charge that the regents' lawsuit is "union-busting," because there is a legitimate concern over releasing data protected under the privacy act. He is an attorney, but said his practice has little experience with public-employees law.

"I do think it's a legitimate question whether the disclosure of this information is or is not prohibited under federal law," he said. "I want to see it work out to everyone's satisfaction."

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Daily Iowan, December 11, 2007
COGS to fight layoffs

The graduate-student union rallies to combat potential layoffs.

By EMILY BUSSE
emily.busse@uiowa.edu

The UI graduate-student union is gearing up to fight any potential layoffs of more teaching and research assistants, noting that 150 TA positions have already been cut this year.

As the UI looks up plans on how to cut $24.7 million from its budget, the Campaign to Organize Graduate Students is not taking the possible loss of members’ jobs lightly.

The union is “putting pressure” on the university by planning rallies, writing statements to UI officials, and sending letters to local media and the state Board of Regents, said Bill Peterson, the organization’s president.

“You’re essentially getting rid of the people who do the basic function of the university, which is teach people,” Peterson said. “It’s a shortsighted way of dealing with the problem.”

Cutting TA positions will only cost the university more in the long run, Peterson said. The loss would damage the quality of education by increasing class sizes and put more work on the remaining TAs, he said.

“There won’t be enough TAs to handle the classes that we have, so they’ll have to increase class sizes, which will mean more grading ... and students won’t get as much attention,” Peterson said. “You’re essentially getting rid of teachers; you take that away, and the university doesn’t work anymore.”

While UI spokesman Tom Moore said he is unable to speculate to what extent graduate-student employees would be hit by the budget cuts, he said it would be “fair to say TAs would be affected,” noting Regent President David Miles’ statement that the “pain of cuts would be spread across all employee groups.”

UFCO-Local 896, founded 13 years ago, represents roughly 2,500 graduate-student TAs and research assistants at the UI. Every two years, COGS bargains for contracts and worker rights.

Other than the official bargaining meetings, UI officials are not required to consult COGS, Peterson said. They otherwise communicate either when someone files a grievance or when incidents such as the budget crisis arise.

Union officials said they’re frustrated with the way UI officials are presenting solutions to the cuts.

“The message we keep hearing is that (UI officials) don’t have any control over this, that they’re just told by the Board of Regents they have a certain number of TA lines, and they don’t really have any other solution,” Peterson said. “We don’t accept that that’s true.”

Moore said UI officials will “continue to welcome any input that people wish to provide,” and they have received thousands of outside suggestions on a website created in February.

The organization has planned a rally for Oct. 28 on the steps of the Old Capitol, rhetoric TA Josh Pederson said, and they hope to not only decry losing TA positions but also suggest alternate solutions to the budget crisis.

“Basically, what we’re going to do is try to make people aware of what is going on and what could potentially happen to TAs,” Pederson said. “We want to make our voice heard.”

They plan to speak out against the possible tuition surcharge and make people aware of research they did on how much officials “at the very top echelon of the university make” in salaries and bonuses, Pederson said.

“If you’re going to cut something, maybe start looking at cutting people who make the most versus the people who make the least,” he said.

But increased budget transparency is one of the main changes Peterson said COGS members want to see before the union could begin to accept the possibility of losing TAs.

“We’re not satisfied to just let our jobs be eliminated and the quality of the university be undermined just because we’re hearing that there isn’t enough money,” Peterson said. “We either need budget transparency in order to figure out another solution or they need to do it.”

Daily Iowan, October 21, 2009
No raises for TAs in regents’ proposal

Board of Regents members and UI graduate officials did not propose a raise for grad-student employees.

By ARIANA WITT
ariana-witt@uiowa.edu

It remains unclear if University of Iowa graduate students will get the raise they’re hoping for.

The Campaign to Organize Graduate Students and UI officials won’t sign contracts until March, but it was evident Monday night the two groups have different priorities.

COGS asked for a 4 percent raise at its proposal meeting Nov. 1. With that increase, UI teaching and research assistants would earn an annual salary of $17,238 for an academic appointment during the 2011-12 year. Another 4 percent raise would have been added for the 2012-13 year.

UI Graduate College officials and the state Board of Regents did not mention a raise at a contract proposal exchange with COGS on Monday.

“I expected it because we know they don’t have a budget yet,” said Kari Thompson, the active president for COGS.

The uncertainty of state appropriations and because
COGS
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the regents have delayed tuition discussions until February after the decision to not include a raise in the regents' initial proposal at this time, said Tom Evans, the regents' general counsel and spokesman for the UI and regent bargaining team.

"Not having an idea of what we’re up against makes it hard to come up with any financial plan," said John Keller, the dean of the UI Graduate College. While officials were hesitant to make any financial offers, they focused on academics.

Regents and UI graduate college officials did manage to reach a decision on a possible cap being placed on the number of teaching or research assistant appointments a graduate student may take while at the UI. Officials proposed students will not be eligible for appointments after eight years in the doctoral program.

"We think this will lead to a healthy graduate program and make sure students are paying most of their attention to the academic process," Keller said. But the cap on appointments is not the best way to push students toward earning a degree, said Thompson, and the proposal may affect a small number of graduate students. Thompson said he does not feel a great number of students will be affected by the decision to not formally state 100 percent tuition and fee coverage in the regents' proposed contract.

The proposal stated that all appointed teaching and research assistants will receive $3,625 of a tuition scholarship each semester for the 2011-12 and the 2012-13 academic years. Thompson said this does not cover all UI graduate-student employees.

"This only covers those in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences," Thompson said. "This is exactly the reason we want it to state 100 percent because tuition isn't the same across colleges, and we have to think about not only this year but the next year."

But Keller said, without knowledge of what regents will do with tuition, it's economically unfair to state tuition coverage in terms of dollars and not percentages.

Regents also introduced a three-tier health-insurance plan for COGS members. Through the UI GRADCare Plan, students would be able to use their health insurance across the state, Evans said, as opposed to the current limited use at the UI Hospitals and Clinics. The plan would be more similar to what UI staff and faculty have, he said.

Closed bargaining between the three organizations is slated to begin Dec. 6, Evans said. Final decisions on proposed changes to the COGS contract are due March 16.
Grad students brace for negotiations

By NICK HASSETT

Graduate students at the University of Iowa are tired of “paying to work.”

The Campaign to Organize Graduate Students, a local union that represents graduate-assistant employees, met Monday with the state Board of Regents to negotiate the UE/COGS collective-bargaining agreement.

Though no agreement was reached Monday night, the parties will have until Feb. 20 to negotiate. The agreement governs conditions of employment for graduate assistants and is negotiated every two years.

This time, COGS officials are demanding a change: They want mandatory student fees and tuition covered by graduate-student wages.

“Our No. 1 priority in our contract negotiations is to get the university and regents to talk about fees,” said Jaason Whisler, the president of COGS. “It’s tuition with another name, and they’ve been unwilling to talk about it.”

The regents approved the set fees for the 2013-14 school year at their December telephone meeting. Graduate liberal arts and sciences students who are taking nine or more semester hours are expected to pay $793.60 in fees. This year, students paid $730.60.

COGS delivered a petition with nearly 800 signatures to UI President Sally Mason’s office on Feb. 1 as part of an effort to “Bill the UI” for the fees.

Now, the group is in the final stage of negotiations with the regents, and COGS members aren’t sure whether the negotiations will be successful.

Sarah Eideleberry, the green area chief steward and member of the COGS Bargaining Committee, thought recent developments in collective bargaining across the country have left the regents less willing to negotiate.

“Unfortunately, the political tenor toward unions has become more combative,” she said. “The political climate has influenced this process, making the university and the regents less interested in moving to the middle.”

Whisler was more optimistic.

“We’re still hopeful we can reach a tentative agreement,” he said. “But they have to give us a fair contract or this will end up in arbitration.”

The arbitration process, which will be triggered if the groups are unable to come to an agreement, involves an independent judge looking over the positions of both COGS and the regents, and making a decision on the contract.

The arbitration date is set for Feb. 20.

Bill Peterson, an adjunct assistant professor of physics and former COGS president, said he wasn’t aware of any time in the organization’s history that negotiations had gone to arbitration.

“The idea of arbitration makes it so [the UI and regents] have to negotiate. But it could go badly for either side,” he said.

Whisler said he thinks the burden should be reduced for all students.

“As a progressive union, we believe in affordable education for all,” he said. “As happy as in-state undergrads were [about the decision to freeze in-state tuition], we wish the tuition freeze applied to out of state and graduate students. While they may plan for tuition increases in mandatory fees puts an additional burden on students.”

UI Student Government President Nic Pottebaum had doubts about the effort to eliminate student fees.

“The revenue has to come from somewhere, and you’d presume graduate students or undergrad will have to pay,” he said. “I’m curious where they think the money would be made up.”

Daily Iowan, February 5, 2013