A HISTORY OF UE LOCAL 896-COGS
1996-2016
John was a member of UE-COGS from 1999 to 2006, during which time he served as a steward in the History Department (1999-2006) and as the local’s recording secretary (2000-02) and chair of the Labor Solidarity Committee (2003-05). As committee chair, he was the UE-COGS delegate to public-sector convergences held in Mexico, Canada, and the US. He is currently oral historian at the UI Labor Center, where he collects interviews and other historical materials related to the Iowa labor movement (including COGS).
THERE IS POWER IN A UNION:
A BRIEF HISTORY OF UE-COGS LOCAL 896

On April 16, 1996, graduate employees at the University of Iowa (UI) in Iowa City voted 949 to 667 to certify the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America (UE) as their collective bargaining agent. The vote was the largest union victory in right-to-work Iowa in more than a decade and one of the largest nationwide in 1996. It transformed a homegrown organizing campaign—the Campaign to Organize Graduate Students (COGS)—into UE-COGS Local 896, a union representing over two thousand teaching and research assistants.

Writing in the union’s newsletter, COGNITION, shortly after the election, History graduate student David Colman picked up on the victory’s historic nature to point the way toward future success. “It is and will be COGS’ connection to the lessons learned from past struggles for dignity and equality that will ensure its persistence and achievements,” he wrote. “On April 16, graduate employees—from physicists to anthropologists, mathematicians to historians—drew on the lessons of history and decided that only a collective organization will protect us from insecurity and guarantee us an equal voice in the conditions of our lives…After celebrations have subsided, we must begin the serious work of coming together to build a strong union and an active membership committed to turning the YES votes into real gains at the bargaining table.”

For over twenty years, generations of UE-COGS officers and rank-and-file members have made such gains possible. Early contracts began the process of increasing graduate employee pay, developing an effective grievance procedure, and building and defending a comprehensive health insurance plan. Over the last decade, UE-COGS officers and members organized and lobbied to pressure the UI and Board of Regents to offer full tuition remission and to begin similar remission of fees. Moreover, with regard to COGS governance, they constructed innovative systems for minority representation and internal organizing to grow and maintain the union’s strength in the face of potential discrimination and constant turnover. As a COGS member wrote in the wake of the successes of the first contract in 1997, “The gains so far could not have been won if the graduate students at the UoI had not joined together in a union, if we had not worked together as a union, if we had not reached out to other students, faculty and the community to explain why it is so important that graduate employees have decent wages and decent health care. This contract shows there is power in a union.”

BEFORE UE: CREATING COGS

The UI’s graduate teaching and research assistants had made sporadic attempts at union organization as far back as the late 1960s, and, despite the objections of the Board of Regents, Iowa’s Public Employment Relations Act of 1974 authorized graduate employees to bargain collectively. But the first attempt to go all the way to a representation election did not take place until the early 1990s, a period which saw a number of dispersed efforts at rank-and-file organizing around issues ranging from lack of adequate health insurance to academic freedom. One of the most important early sites for such organizing was the Rhetoric Department, which employed graduate students from across campus to labor under notoriously difficult conditions.

By early 1993, graduate employees in Rhetoric and other departments on campus had formed the nucleus of a new organization focused specifically on obtaining union representation, the Campaign to Organize Graduate Students (COGS). Once graduate employees had settled on unionization as their route to addressing their broad set of concerns, they sought affiliation with a larger organization. Although they considered affiliation with UE and a number of other unions, a majority of COGS members eventually settled on the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), in large part because of SEIU’s association with reform within the AFL-CIO and its aggressive
organizing stance. They became part of SEIU Local 150 out of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, forming SEIU-COGS Local 150 (AFL-CIO). Over time, however, SEIU’s approach had difficulty creating sustained connections to graduate employees, which made the appeals of a university backed anti-union campaign all the more effective. In April 1994, SEIU-COGS lost its representation election by a narrow margin.

THE BIRTH OF UE-COGS

In the wake of the SEIU defeat, COGS survived through the dedication of a core group of activists, many of whom had played supporting roles in the first campaign. Over the course of the 1994-95 academic year, this core group grew in size until it became clear that graduate employees were once again ready to attempt another certification election, with the UE besting the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) in the contest for affiliation. John Scott, a Black man from Detroit who had taught in New York and done leftwing political work before coming to graduate school in Anthropology, later recalled the debate:

I remember the first thing I ever said at a COGS meeting…There was this big debate. Should we join the [AFT] or should we join the UE. And I raised my hand and said, “I’ve been a member of the [AFT] and [know] its history.” It’s a big teachers union, it’s about teaching, [and] that’s all good [and] everything. However, its issues about race have been a little different. The UE was always an example of an institution that tried to keep certain non-economic issues of people central. If I had to choose, I would choose that one… And people came up to me afterward and said, “That really made a difference.

With the assistance and support of a young group of UE staff, some of whom had experience with other graduate employee unions, members of the new UE-COGS built on the lessons from the previous campaign to develop a more effective model. As Julie Schmid, a UE-COGS member from English who had been part of the SEIU campaign, recalls:

It was so different. It’s so hard to explain to people who weren’t there for both…We could tell there was a difference…There was really an attempt early on to identify people who were going to be department level activists and bring them in…It’s the stewards’ model. . . At least for me, that’s how I was brought in.

UE-COGS also made effective use of member testimonials to highlight and personalize organizing issues, especially the need for a comprehensive, affordable health insurance plan. Perhaps the most powerful of these testimonials came from Jason Duncan, a graduate student in History who had worked in Rhetoric and been part of the SEIU campaign. In October 1995, Duncan fell and broke his elbow while playing basketball. After enduring six months of physical therapy, his
THE STRUGGLE FOR THE FIRST CONTRACT

Even before the dramatic representation election victory in April 1996, UE-COGS members began organizing in anticipation of the first contract. On April 2, over one hundred people attended a general membership meeting to vote on “the best way to structure our negotiating committee.” From the beginning, UE-COGS culture emphasized rank-and-file participation toward the goal of creating an effective and truly representative organization and contract. As Leslie Cronkhite, a graduate employee in Civil and Environmental Engineering, reminded members, “These contracts will affect everyone, so it is important that your concerns are heard and that you are represented.” She urged members to “get involved in setting the agenda” by starting meetings in their departments and joining committees.

The summer before the first contract also saw UE-COGS members institute other forms of activism that would come to define the local, in particular, rank-and-file organizing and community building within the larger UE and graduate student union movement. In June, COGS representatives attended the UE District 11 council meeting in Milwaukee, where, according to delegate Margaret Loose from English, the COGS story “formed the centerpiece of an afternoon devoted to UE’s plans for and successes in organizing the unorganized.” UE-COGS members also developed their sense of solidarity with their fellow UE members through leafletting at factories around the city and a picnic hosted by UE Local 1111. Loose gently hinted at a culture clash between the graduate employees and their fellow UE members (“they didn’t have any veggie burgers”), but she also suggested the ways in which the two groups began to learn from one another (“they promised to accommodate the Iowa vegetarians at future events!”). Later that summer, UE-COGS delegates, in the first of many such events, attended the fifth annual conference of the Coalition of Graduate Employee Unions, which also highlighted the recent success at Iowa and opportunities for coordinated activism across campuses.

As early as August 1996, UE-COGS and the Board of Regents had commenced preliminary negotiations, with the UI and Regents agreeing to raise the minimum salary by 19 percent, pushing the salary for a base academic year appointment from $10,500 to $12,500. With a broad-based increase established for the lowest paid graduate employees, the UE-COGS Negotiations Committee went on to win an average increase of 8 percent for teaching assistants and 14 percent for research assistants. “Before the start of union negotiations,” committee member Leslie Taylor from American Studies informed the membership, “RA salaries at UI were ranked 9th in the Big Ten; now they will be in the top five.” As with many other issues, however, UE-COGS members found that they had to aggressively enforce these preliminary agreements. In one of many examples of university units failing to increase pay, UE-COGS members pushed back when the Iowa Testing Service tried to back out of an announced plan from July 1996 to increase the pay of its graduate employees by $900. To facilitate such effective enforcement, UE-COGS began developing a system of departmental stewards to be “the first line of defense in protecting the rights of graduate employees.”

UE-COGS members also pushed forward with ratification of a constitution (based in part on the constitution of the Teaching Assistants Association, or TAA, at the University of Wisconsin-Madison). Among other things, it provided for the creation of a “Coordinating Committee,” which included three co-presidents, a financial secretary, recording secretary, chief steward, and sub-committee chairs focused on particular issues or union functions. Two committees and their attendant chairs stood out as particular COGS innovations. Both were the product of John Scott and several other UE-COGS activists who argued that the union needed to be proactive in its approach to anti-discrimination. Their solution was to create two permanent committees with representation on the Coordinating Committee. The first was the Unity Committee, which would be devoted to issues of inclusiveness and (whenever possible) be chaired by someone from a historically underrepresented group. The second committee focused on the issues of international graduate students and was likewise to be chaired by
someone from that group.

The first round of contract negotiations began in late September 1996. In addition to salaries, the Negotiations Committee reported that its top priorities—ratified by the membership at a meeting of September 17—were healthcare, childcare, tuition waivers, paid time off, and “improved working conditions.” Specific goals included a comprehensive health insurance plan paying 100 percent of employee benefits and 85 percent of benefits for spouses and domestic partners, guaranteed time off for established holidays, workloads that included appointment percentages and duties, and the creation of a grievance procedure. “Your responses have helped the Negotiations Committee represent the real conditions and needs of graduate employees,” committee member Mike Evces from the College of Education wrote in October. “During summer salary talks, our position was always strengthened when we could refer to the actual experiences and real salaries of our colleagues. Our lived experience provides the best arguments against the bureaucratic abstractions of the administration.”

Another critical bargaining issue was inclusion in the contract of a “no-discrimination” clause to prohibit discrimination based on “race, creed, color, national origin, age, sex, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, and any other classifications that deprive a person of consideration as an individual.” At the time, such clauses were common in other union contracts around the country, and many UE-COGS members were surprised and outraged by the refusal of the UI and Board of Regents to include it within the scope of the grievance procedure.

UE-COGS members organized around the issue, including soliciting support from other graduate employee unions, whose members emailed the Board of Regents in solidarity. They also staged an action, leading a march into a campus lecture delivered by civil rights historian Taylor Branch. “We chose this event to highlight the administration’s refusal to include the clause in our contract,” John Scott later wrote. “COGS members, their spouses, partners, and other supporters, 45 people in all, entered the auditorium fifteen minutes before the event started, singing ‘This Little Light of Mine’ (a song from the Civil Rights Movement). Banners were unfurled calling on the administration to sign the clause for no discrimination. COGS co-president, Margaret Loose, read a prepared statement, saying ‘We requested this clause for two reasons. It is in the interest of all of our members to work in a discrimination-free environment. But more importantly, we requested this clause because it is morally right.”

The clause and the action were controversial within UE-COGS, especially after some pro-clause activists began to argue that the UI’s rejection of the clause should mean rejection of the contract. The union, however, maintained its long-term commitment to the principles embodied in the Unity Committee, finally winning (in the second contract) a memorandum of understanding regarding discrimination that included a grievance procedure, although one separate from that for grievances not related to discrimination.

BUILDING ON SUCCESS

In February 1997, UE-COGS members ratified their first contract, narrowly avoiding arbitration (the final step in Iowa’s public employment bargaining system, which strictly prohibits strikes
but rewards the “least unreasonable” negotiating stance). The COGNITION hailed the contract as “among . . . the best for public employees in Iowa and for graduate students across the US,” addressing many of the animating concerns of graduate employees, including overwork, regulation of appointment procedures, and paid leaves of absences.

Perhaps most significantly, the contract established UIGRADCare, a comprehensive health insurance plan, modeled on the faculty plan but designed by UE-COGS members to address the unique needs of graduate employees. It covered 90 percent of costs, with an out-of-pocket maximum of $1,000. Primary care was still provided through the Student Health Services, but the plan now covered, among other things, routine physicals, eye exams, immunizations, well-child visits, physical therapy, chiropractic care, and prescription drugs, including oral contraceptives. It was open to graduate employees with at least a 25 percent appointment, as well as to their spouses/domestic partners and children (although the initial premiums, beginning at $11.33 for single employees and jumping to $145.58 for employees and family, were still optimized for people without spouses or children). As Margaret Loose informed the membership, “UI GradCare results directly from our organized demand for it and is proof that we can do as a union what we could not do individually.”

As important as UIGRADCare and other such successes were, however, much remained to be done. In addition to the no-discrimination clause, UE-COGS members continued to organize around a number of issues including educating members regarding their rights under UIGRADCare, seeking parking permits, lifting caps on appointment percentages, and resisting job reclassifications that threatened to remove graduate employees from the bargaining unit. Likewise, a growing number of UE-COGS members began to mobilize around significant constitutional revisions that they believed would be necessary to fix flaws in the first constitution and to build a strong foundation for the future. They agreed on the need for more emphasis

BEYOND UI: UE-COGS’ TRADITION OF SOLIDARITY

UE-COGS has a long history of deep involvement in the struggles of others. As early as 1998, they supported members of Iowa City’s American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees Local 183 in their fight against job losses among paratransit drivers. In that same year, UE-COGS members became involved in an (ultimately successful) effort by nurses and other workers at the UI Hospitals and Clinics to organize with SEIU. In 2004, UE-COGS members volunteered as organizers to assist graduate employees engaged in an organizing campaign at the University of Minnesota, and, in 2011, members joined thousands of others, including the UW Madison’s TAA, in occupying and protesting at the Wisconsin Capitol in an effort to prevent the gutting of public sector union rights there.

Such solidarity has extended internationally as well. In December 1997, UE-COGS member Mary Crippen participated in a worker exchange as part of the UE’s strategic alliance with the Mexican Authentic Workers Front (the Frente Autentico del Trabajo, or FAT). As Crippen later reported, “I have come back with an incredible feeling of pride for the work that all of us as members of the UE are helping to make possible.” She and other delegates organized a forum at the Iowa City Public Library to share their experiences with UE-COGS members and the wider community. Crippen’s visit was the beginning of a long relationship between UE-COGS and the FAT that would blossom into numerous worker exchanges, a voluntary dues check-off to support the FAT, and the local playing a central role in the UE’s efforts to use international solidarity to confront neoliberal globalization. Over the next decade, UE-COGS delegates would attend a protest action against the World Bank and International Monetary Fund in Washington, DC, numerous meetings of the US Social Forum, and international conferences regarding the conditions of public-sector workers in Mexico, Canada, the US, and Japan.
on representing all parts of the campus well. The resulting changes included a unitary presidency and a new vice president for organizing, who would chair a new Organizing Committee. To further strengthen organizing, the local also hired its first staff organizer, Tracy Chang, a student from Sociology, who had been a long-time COGS activist. Other innovations designed to promote organizing and enforce the contract were the addition of four area chief stewards for the different segments of the campus as well as the creation of monthly Stewards Councils “to provide stewards with a forum to learn from their peers in other departments, to continue stewards’ training, and to involve the stewards more directly in organizing.” Having fun was part of organizing as well. As early as November 1996, UE-COGS members began an annual celebration and talent show, COGSAPOLOOZA, where members were invited “to put together your favorite skit, musical piece, comedy routine, trick, bizarre and unnatural act, or any other hidden talents you might have.” By the spring of 1997, the local was hosting a labor film series; “project nights,” where members would socialize while helping with office work; and happy hours at George’s Buffet in Iowa City.

UE-COGS members would need all of the organizing and solidarity they could muster as they fought to expand on their initial successes. Arguably the most important issue of the second contract was childcare. Although the university had improved graduate employees’ access to childcare as a response to the first COGS organizing campaign with SEIU, graduate employees with families still lacked sufficient support. As member Loretta Collins told a UE-COGS interviewer in November 1998, “[The childcare stipend] will cover less than two months of the care I will need this semester. Also, students can be reimbursed only once a semester, after they have expended at least $350. It doesn't actually help on a month-by-month basis. The stipend is available for parent students who need care for children younger than two years old. I am glad I have an infant rather than a three year old. I wonder what student parents of 3-5 year olds do to afford care.”

When the UI and Board of Regents refused to discuss childcare in bargaining (since the issue, as with so many others, was permissible and not mandatory in accordance with Iowa public employment law), UE-COGS “laid the groundwork for a large-scale community campaign.” On January 30, 1999, the union held a forum, “We Can Do Better: Addressing the Child Care Crisis in Iowa City.” The event had over fifty participants, including members and many other people from throughout the community. As Organizing Committee member Lyn Elliot reported, “The forum was a great start to a community-wide coalition on the child care crisis on the UI campus, and the larger Iowa City community.” Although
prevented from achieving their initial goals by the refusal of UI/Regent negotiators to bargain over childcare, members of the Bargaining Committee (as the Negotiations Committee was now called) continued to fight for their members’ priorities by pushing to reduce health insurance premiums for graduate employees with dependents.

In the second contract, ratified by the membership in February 1999, UE-COGS increased salaries, secured defensible human rights provisions, expanded UIGRADCare to include mental health and dental insurance, and increased to 70 percent the employer health insurance contribution for graduate employees with families. Even as the union’s members celebrated their second successful negotiations, however, they looked forward to battles to come over accessible and affordable childcare, overturning insurance discrimination against same-sex couples, and—one of their longest standing issues—tuition remission.

THE LONG BATTLE OVER TUITION AND FEES

Beginning in the fall of 1999, UE-COGS began to focus its efforts on preventing graduate employees from returning much of their paychecks to the university in the form of tuition and fees. In October, the membership formed an ad-hoc study committee. Its work produced a resolution that committed UE-COGS to the pursuit of a “full waiver, remission, or grant of tuition and fees for all bargaining unit employees.” As preliminary actions, they scheduled a teach-in for the next semester and resolved to focus on tuition waivers at the UE’s upcoming political action day in Des Moines.

Tuition and fee remission seemed all the more important in the face of another growing issue—pay erosion. By the fall of 1999, History stewards discovered that their department had begun paying those TAs who were returning to the same appointment more than TAs who were new to that appointment (even when the “new” TAs were experienced). Upon investigation, UE-COGS discovered that several more departments were involved and that the issue stretched back to a new salary policy established by administrators in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS). The union filed a grievance against the new policy and took the grievance (for the first time in the union’s history) all the way to arbitration, where it was denied.

In the face of pay erosion and other threats, UE-COGS returned to organizing. In the spring of 2000, the local set a goal of 75 new members by end of the semester. “To reach this goal,”
Jen Sherer, a graduate student in English and vice president for organizing, informed the local, “we need every member to take on an organizing role.” “Organizers and stewards are already at work, making phone calls, talking to non-members during office hours, planning departmental meetings, and designing the bargaining survey. But in a member-run Union as large as ours, ‘designated’ organizers can never come close to reaching everyone. We need every member’s help.” To assist these member-organizers, the local appropriated the funds to hire a part-time office coordinator, who would be responsible for “various critical tasks related to membership records, organizing, and office management.” They also engaged in actions, including grade-ins, in which members assembled to do their work in a public space as a way of illustrating the reality of the COGS slogan, “The UI Works Because We Do!” The expenditure of resources, time, and effort paid off, with over 100 members committing to assist with organizing efforts the following year.

This public pressure—combined with the institution of waivers at competing institutions—finally pushed the UI and Board of Regents to begin discussing the possibility of tuition remission during the third round of contract negotiations (2000-01). The university proposal, however, involved paying for remission by reducing salaries. Although such a proposal might have constituted a remission for those employees who were paying full tuition, it would have resulted in a significant pay cut for those “post-comp” employees who no longer enrolled in courses (or paid tuition) by virtue of having completed their comprehensive exams. Moreover, the university, presumably in a move to pressure the union during bargaining, increased post-comp fees by almost 500 percent. Even in the face of such pressure, the membership refused to accept any contract that would result in a significant portion of the bargaining unit receiving a cut in take-home pay. In the end, there was no agreement on tuition remission in the contract that year. Overall, however, the new contract succeeded in ameliorating some of the inequalities produced by the category of “returning” TAs and strengthened UIGRADCare, including adding substance abuse coverage and (for the first time) making same-sex domestic partners eligible for benefits under the plan.

Over the course of the next two years, continued organizing convinced the UI and Board of Regents to take another approach. In the fourth contract (negotiated in 2002-03), the UI and UE-COGS agreed to “tuition scholarships,” which provided a $375 rebate on tuition for all graduate employees enrolled in at least 9 credit hours and with at least 25 percent appointment. In accordance with the agreement, the scholarship would increase to $750 in the 2004-05 academic year. Although this scholarship model required foregoing or limiting raises, it became the model for extending a full tuition remission over the course of the next several contracts, especially in the face of rising tuition costs. In each contract, UE-COGS pressed
successfully to increase the tuition scholarship, thereby increasing overall take-home pay as well. By 2011, UE-COGS finally ratified a contract guaranteeing 100 percent tuition scholarships—based on CLAS rate. “This is something that COGS has been working on for a long time, so it’s a really big win,” Religious Studies graduate student and COGS president Kari Thompson told the UE News.

Unfortunately, the university quickly began to undermine this historic victory. In the College of Education, which was not bound to the CLAS tuition rate, departments began to charge their graduate employees higher rates, requiring them to continue paying tuition out of their wages. Likewise, the university as a whole began increasing student fees (not subject to the agreement on tuition). Once again, UE-COGS organized in the face of adversity, empowering members in the College of Education to fight back (and, in one case, to sit across the bargaining table from their employer and demand an answer for the rate increase). In the Fall of 2014, UE-COGS held a press conference in the center of campus and released a white paper on financial insecurity among graduate employees. The paper highlighted the fact that 33 percent of graduate assistants have 25 percent appointments, or just 10 hours of work per week, and make only $9,040.00 per year, well below the Federal poverty line of $11,670 per year for a single adult.” “Fees represent more than a full month’s salary for that group, and because fees must be paid before graduate students receive a paycheck, they are a significant source of graduate student debt.” They followed up the press conference and white paper by reaching out to campus allies (including faculty) and staging a “Rally Against Student Debt.” At the bargaining table, UE-COGS pressed the UI and Board of Regents on the issue of fees in the face of recent court rulings establishing that supplemental pay fell within the scope of wages (and was thus a mandatory topic of bargaining). The local conducted mass mobilization, collecting over 1,000 petition signatures in a single week. Melissa Zimdars, of Communication Studies and campus chief steward, said, “our mass press campaign put relentless pressure on campus administration. We mobilized the members to the point that folks in he bargaining unit who refused to sign a [membership] card were signing the petition for fees and making eloquent arguments in the union’s favor.”

Hoping to take fees off the table, the Board of Regents filed a petition with Iowa’s Public Employment Relations Board (PERB) only to find, to their surprise, that PERB issued a preliminary ruling in favor of the UE-COGS position. The Local demanded 100% in fees and refused to compromise unless they were granted 100 percent tuition remission for the College of Education.

JONATHAN KISSAM WITH BULLHORN AT COGS PROTEST AGAINST PRIVATIZATION
President, said, “in a final showdown during negotiations dozens of members attended bargaining to angrily demand fees. This final show of force lead to a victory of 25% in fees.” The Bargaining Committee not only placed the union on the road to full remission of fees but also secured 100 percent tuition remission for the College of Education, and protected UIGRADCare and the memorandum regarding discrimination and human rights (also on the chopping block in negotiations).

CONCLUSION

For twenty years, Iowa’s graduate employees, working together through UE-COGS, have secured greater prosperity, justice, and dignity in their workplaces and communities. Although they continue to face numerous struggles—including attacks on public employee bargaining, declining appointments, and efforts to undercut organizing and defense of the contract by limiting the data on graduate employees that the university provides to the union—there is reason for optimism founded in their long history of success. Their compensation package has risen from the bottom of the Big Ten universities to the top, and their health insurance is better than that offered to Iowa faculty. Their wins have made graduate education possible for thousands of University of Iowa students. As member Yvonne Pitts noted, having the union was what allowed her as a working-class woman to go to graduate school at all. Despite outside pressures, internal tensions, and the ever-present reality of constant turnover, Iowa’s graduate employees have held fast to the principles of democratic, rank-and-file unionism, engaged in continuous and creative organizing and, crucially, cultivated new generations of leaders both for UE-COGS and for social justice movements and organizations beyond the university. David Colman’s reminder to the membership in the wake of the union’s birth still holds true today: “Remember, there is power in the union.”
WE form an organization which unites all workers on an industrial basis, and rank-and-file control, regardless of craft, age, sex, nationality, race, creed or political beliefs, and pursue at all times a policy of aggressive struggle to improve our conditions.”

— from the Preamble to the UE Constitution