

REPORT FROM THE FIELD

Against “Normalcy”: A Collective Testimony of Student Workers Organizing During the Pandemic

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Abstract

In the Spring of 2020, the onset of the global pandemic intensified existing inequalities, but also accelerated organizing within some of the most precarious economic sectors. The neoliberal university was no exception to this general trend, and from 2020 until 2022, student workers organized for union contracts, just pandemic responses, independent arbitration for harassment and improved conditions at their workplaces. In those years, while neoliberal universities issued empty calls for “community,” and a prompt return to normalcy, student workers mobilized themselves and won unprecedented gains from their institutions, rejecting administrative pleas for the defense of the status quo. The following “Report from the Field,” details the struggle of student workers organizing from 2020 to 2022 at the University of New Mexico, the University of Michigan, New York University, and Columbia University, and offers a collectively authored reflection on the challenges, victories and future concerns of its respective movements.

In spring 2020, universities around the United States began sending out emails bemoaning COVID-19’s disruption of academic life, and assuring students and

staff that universities would remain committed to their pedagogical mission. These emails came in many forms, but most of them invoked gratitude to the academic “community” and “concern” for the student body that was longing for a return to “normalcy.” A few such messages even included the occasional reference to an institution’s unspecified social justice aims.

The compassionate thrust of these emails offered a cruel counterpoint to the difficult conditions students, faculty, and staff were experiencing at the time. The already precarious economic situation of most people working in higher education became more acute during the pandemic, and early university responses to the crisis, including booting international students from university housing, only exacerbated that precarity.¹ Yet in the face of many universities’ attempts to restore a sense of “normalcy,” organizing efforts that endeavor to radically transform them have also grown stronger.

As ILWCH’s 2021 “Pandemic Roundtable” explored in detail, the pandemic simultaneously deepened inequalities and intensified struggles for justice in the workplace. Universities were no exception. In fact, the intensification of precarity in higher education during the pandemic has only intensified workplace organizing, primarily amongst student-workers. The following essay reflects on a few of the student-worker movements that emerged in the wake of the pandemic, and in some cases, won unprecedented victories. The reflections are collectively authored by nearly a dozen student workers who were active in these struggles from 2020 to 2022 at the University of New Mexico, the University of Michigan, New York University, and Columbia University. Although our struggles faced distinct challenges and institutional obstacles, we hope that in highlighting these experiences we can provide insights into the wide range of conditions that other student-workers might confront in their own organizing efforts.

Most importantly, we hope that this text can serve as a useful resource to fellow student workers, whether they are at an early or advanced stage of their organizing. In compiling a collective text, we have also worked to ensure that we avoid cheerleading for ourselves. Even our victories, such as winning contracts or union recognition, have frequently created new problems. Nevertheless, these contradictions and challenges continue to push us forward, and help us grapple with the complexities of organizing.

In short, what follows is an experimental set of reflections on disparate struggles for workplace justice within the neoliberal university. It aims to dispel the mythology of institutional paternalism and assess how the past two years have spurred and deterred mobilizations. We offer it with humility and solidarity.

Setting the Stage: Graduate Worker Struggles at the University of Michigan

On September 8, 2020, hundreds of graduate student workers at the University of Michigan (UM) went on strike. Their demand: a “safe and just pandemic response.” Faced with UM’s fall reopening plan, which insisted on a fully in-person semester despite the deadly COVID-19 pandemic, rank-and-file members from the Graduate Employees’ Organization (GEO) organized around a set of demands that would ensure safe teaching conditions, while also mitigating the consequences of disrupted research, childcare, and travel. Inspired by months of antiracist and working-

class uprisings against anti-Black police violence, GEO simultaneously issued a series of public safety demands on UM. For nine days, GEO members refused to teach classes, grade assignments, or attend classes until these demands were met. In place of work, they formed in-person and virtual picket lines and staged teach-ins about the history of labor on campus. Workers from the residences and dining halls, who had launched their own ad-hoc work stoppages, joined us in organizing these events. In so doing, we together revived a tactic that had originated on the Ann Arbor campus in 1965, when Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and several UM faculty held the first teach-in against the Vietnam War.

The 2020 Strike: “A Safe and Just Pandemic Response”

Current GEO members are indebted to a long tradition of union activism at the University of Michigan. Ours is the longest-running union of graduate student workers in the United States. GEO was certified in 1974; shortly thereafter, it became Local 3550 of the American Federation of Teachers.² GEO has a long history of fighting for economic and social justice for educators and the communities they serve. Yet the 2020 walkout was historic in its own right. This was GEO’s first strike since 1975, when members picketed for one month in the unforgiving Michigan winter. Notably, it was also the first time UM graduate student workers had gone on strike while a collective bargaining agreement was in effect. As a result, the university administration was quick to declare the strike illegal, arguing that it violated both a no-strike clause in the GEO contract and Michigan’s Public Employment Relations Act, which prohibits state employees from striking.

The decision by GEO members to strike in 2020 was not taken lightly. Despite UM’s cultivated image as a “liberal bubble,” the UM administration responded to the pandemic with craven disregard for public health. As covid cases surged and with vaccines still months away from approval, the UM administration pushed for a fully in-person fall semester. GEO entered into impact bargaining with the university to negotiate new and urgent pandemic-specific rights and protections that would ensure safe teaching conditions while mitigating disruptions to research, childcare, travel, and immigration.

As it minimized the harms of the pandemic, our reputedly progressive employer used the pandemic to impose austerity, raise tuition, and fatten its endowment. During the 2021 fiscal year, UM’s endowment grew an astounding 41 percent, reaching \$17 billion.³ After bringing seventy thousand students and staff back to campus amid a global pandemic, the university then used the pandemic as a cover to further expand policing on campus. In particular, UM’s new Ambassadors Program paired work-study students with armed Division of Public Safety and Security (DPSS) officers to enforce social distancing measures, thus extending the reach of police into our community and further legitimizing law enforcement as the guarantor of public health and safety.

The announcement of the Ambassadors Program helped GEO connect its public health and workplace safety demands to broader issues of public safety. When impact bargaining reached an impasse, GEO’s newly formed Policing Working Group proposed additional strike demands. These included calls for a “disarmed and

demilitarized workplace”; a 50 percent reduction in the UM DPSS budget; and the severing of ties between DPSS and other law enforcement agencies that have historically been deployed to curb student, labor, and antiracist activism on campus. In the context of the 2020 antipolice uprisings across the country, our membership adopted these demands as part of our strike platform.

Through the antipolicing demands, GEO worked to make visible UM’s relationship to the prison-industrial complex, just as earlier generations of student and labor radicals had exposed the Cold War university’s complicity in the military-industrial complex. GEO members have long been involved in community struggles against police violence, especially since the murder of Ann Arbor resident Aura Rosser by city police in 2014. John Seto, who was Ann Arbor’s police chief at the time of Rosser’s murder, became UM’s Director of Housing Security one month after he “retired” from the Ann Arbor Police Department. At the time of this writing, he continues to hold this position at UM.

Prior to impact bargaining in 2020, GEO had pursued transformative reforms to campus policing. Just one year earlier, during the 2019–2020 contract campaign, GEO proposed “disarming and demilitarizing” the university police force. At the time, these demands did not go far: membership ranked them as a low priority and UM’s negotiators quickly declared them to be “permissive subjects of bargaining,” which the university was not compelled to consider. However, in the intervening months, a sea change occurred. The 2020 police murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others sparked a summer of nationwide protests, which GEO members joined in Ann Arbor and nearby cities like Ypsilanti and Detroit. These conditions created new energy and urgency in GEO’s ranks, and the abolitionist demands brought considerable local and national attention.

In the end, the university did incorporate much of GEO’s pandemic strike platform. The administration promised, for example, to create a body with GEO representation to study the DPSS and make recommendations. In October, the administration also announced the formation of the Advancing Public Safety Task Force, which it described as an “antiracist initiative.” Since the task force’s work began, however, the university has narrowed its scope, starved it of resources, packed it with police and antilabor voices, and all but disavowed its mission. The Task Force turned out to be an example of what Dylan Rodríguez calls “the triage and public relations model” of reform that has become the norm at universities and colleges nationwide.⁴ Thus, while historic, the fall 2020 strike ultimately fell short of its immediate aims.

Present Conditions

Our experience with a campus task force points to a broader set of issues that GEO, as a union, faces in its confrontation with its superficially progressive employer in a politically divided state. In December 2012, the lame duck Michigan legislature passed a so-called Right to Work (RTW) law, and UM immediately tried to use this as an opportunity to weaken our union and undermine job security for graduate students. Michigan’s RTW legislation allows graduate student workers to receive union-negotiated benefits and protections without contributing union dues or

being union members. The university has also long exploited the high turnover rate of graduate students, especially master's students, to stall organizing efforts. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated these issues.

Through these challenges, GEO members remain committed to fighting for safe and just working conditions and an affordable and equitable campus and community. In recent years, GEO has successfully won: childcare subsidies for graduate workers (2002); some of the country's first trans-inclusive healthcare benefits (2006 and later expanded); disability accommodations (2011); a cap on mental health co-pays (2017); expanded paid parental leave (2017); hours caps for international graduate workers with visa restrictions (2017); and the creation of campus Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Graduate Student Staff Assistant jobs with full union pay and benefits (2017). In 2021, GEO's housing caucus worked with community organizations to convince the Ann Arbor council to adopt a housing ordinance that improves the rights of all renters in the city.

GEO members and other student groups continue to organize around many of the same issues that graduate students were organizing around decades ago. We recognize the critical importance of documenting and transmitting institutional memory of past student organizers to newer students and to students across disciplines. As a union we are working to more intentionally archive our union history through the creation of union archivist positions so that the university is less able to exploit these knowledge gaps. Pandemic working conditions and the experience of GEO's strike have both affected organizing efforts *and* created new opportunities for building cross-campus and cross-community solidarity. The 2020 strike helped propel organizing efforts by other campus workers. Amid the GEO walkout, residential advisors (RAs) also refused to work until their health and safety concerns were taken seriously. RAs were tasked with enforcing social distancing for a university that insisted on a residential semester despite the high transmission rates on campus. Many RAs contracted covid and watched the residents they support fall ill until UM closed residence halls in November 2020.

The importance of labor solidarity has only grown as the pandemic disruption continues. When our sibling union, the Lecturers' Employee Organization (LEO - AFT Local 6244), negotiated their contract during the summer of 2021, GEO mobilized members to attend rallies and informational picketing, preparing our members to walk out with lecturers should they strike. Although LEO faced an intransigent administration that refused to budge on pay parity for lecturers across the three campuses, on the eve of a potential strike by LEO and GEO members, management offered substantial concessions. This contributed to a historic contract for LEO—one that secured pay parity for lecturers at all three UM campuses after decades of struggle. LEO has continued to build power by organizing gallery, library, archive, and museum workers who will now bargain their first contract.

During the Omicron surge in winter 2022, GEO also organized a successful "e-pivot" with faculty and undergraduate supporters. Despite a record-breaking number of covid cases and an overwhelmed hospital system, UM again insisted on in-person classes to start the semester. In response, instructors organized support and temporarily moved classes online for the duration of the surge. Over two thousand instructors supported this e-pivot, and a substantial number of classes moved

online temporarily. This novel labor action raised the question, who decides what our working conditions look like: management or workers? GEO has a decades-long history of bargaining to improve the working and living conditions of its membership, and we draw on that activist identity and on past victories to propel ourselves forward.

Cigarettes and Brigades: Organizing in Higher Education in New York City

In 2021, the picket lines at NYU and Columbia required three essential items: coffee, cigarettes, and comrades. The first two were relatively easy to come by, but the last ingredient took a bit longer to cultivate.

The friendships that came together to produce this very report emerged out of a failed reading group on the “agrarian question” in 2019. Like most good reading groups, the cohort fell apart over an ideological split; and like most good splits, our political tendency (obviously the correct one) opted to keep getting together, but mostly just to drink, yell, and smoke cigarettes on each other’s porches. While that practice offered us some catharsis through the toughest months of the pandemic, in early 2021, it became evident that our universities were about to see a wave of student-worker strikes. As a result, we returned to the cyclone of organizing on our campuses, but we did so with a shared promise: to support each other’s fights, not just with our bodies and our time, but also with the critical gift of picket line cigarettes. And so, our mutual support brigade was formed.

What follows is a collective narrative of the intersecting struggles that took place at two of New York City’s universities in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nourished by the friendship we have cultivated over the past few years, we hope our history can help others make sense of their own struggles, just as we reflect on the limitations of our own victories. We lead with the imagery of a few cigarettes shared amongst friends, and a few promises made over empty beers, because somewhere in that encounter we, and many others like us, approached the beginning of a shared victory. In what follows, we will try to map out the conditions that led to this explosion of organizing and militant friendship, and hopefully, come to terms with what they mean for the future of labor in the university.

NYU and the Shape of Student Organizing in New York City

NYU’s Graduate Student Organizing Committee (GSOC) has a long and illustrious history fighting the NYU administration, and GSOC’s recent victories have been built on that history.⁵ GSOC’s collective bargaining rights were first recognized by NLRB in 2000. One year later, after the threat of a strike, GSOC became the first recognized graduate worker union at a private university anywhere in the United States. Its first contract was negotiated only after another strike authorization vote. After the National Labor Relations Board’s (NLRB) Brown decision in 2004, which reclassified graduate workers as “students,” the administration, under the leadership of then NYU President John Sexton, decided it would only continue to recognize GSOC under the conditions of an “open shop,” and without a grievance procedure. That decision effectively kneecapped the union’s power, and led to the GSOC strike of 2005–

2006, still today the longest-running graduate worker strike in the US history. The union would not be recognized by the university again until 2013. In 2015, GSOC's second contract was finalized just hours before another authorized strike was set to begin.

The bargaining sessions for GSOC's third contract were scheduled for spring 2020, but were delayed due to the pandemic. When sessions came back online in fall 2020, student workers packed Zoom rooms for nine months to watch fellow students testify about the material and emotional tolls the pandemic had taken on their lives. NYU's negotiating team gave little ground. Wage freezes had been implemented for NYU faculty and staff at the beginning of the pandemic, and who were the graduate workers to demand otherwise? In one session dedicated to the needs of non-US citizen students, an NYU administrator fell asleep on camera. No good faith movement from the university was made for months; it was only after a strike authorization vote was taken that any meaningful counterproposals were made, and it was not until the third week of a strike that NYU actually budged on its positions. Negotiation breakthroughs included NYU agreeing to raise the hourly wage from \$20 to \$26, create a healthcare fund for out-of-pocket costs, fund paid sick leave, and offer six weeks of paid parental leave. GSOC also won acknowledgment from NYU that contract bargaining could demand more than just material gains and extend to the presence of police and immigration officers on all corners of our campus. The enormous wins indicated the strength and resolve of our rank-and-file led union to demand more.

The three largest graduate worker populations in New York City—at the CUNY Graduate Center, Columbia University, and NYU—all exist within different university systems and each face different administrative preoccupations. Columbia and NYU are two of the city's largest real estate barons.⁶ The total value of NYU's real estate portfolio, however, is only a third of Columbia's. The downtown university did not adopt the financial model of aggressive private equity investments and conservative use of endowment funds for operating costs pioneered by the Ivy League until relatively recently. From 1970 to 2000, NYU spent 85 percent of the money it raised through donations, with only 15 percent going toward its endowment.⁷ Around the year 2000, however, the administration began to emulate the portfolios of its wealthier, more elite peers by shifting investments away from the stability of bonds and toward larger, riskier investments in private equity.⁸ NYU's aspiration of joining the ranks of the elite might have contributed to its relative willingness to bargain; the university has long aspired to compete with the Ivy League in terms of prestige.

But beyond private universities' libidinal investment in keeping up with their perceived peers (and of course our tenacious organizing), what caused NYU to capitulate? We have two important phenomena of the US pandemic to thank. Like at the University of Michigan, the first was the incredible, once-in-a-generation mobilizations after the murder of George Floyd against the NYPD that occurred in the summer of 2020, right on NYU's doorstep. Our ability to negotiate sanctuary protections for undocumented students and to argue that the presence of police on campus represented a legitimate health-and-safety issue for workers were no doubt bolstered by the recent memory of cop cars burning in Soho. Also akin to our comrades at

Michigan, the second was the tremendous financial gains NYU made in these same months. Despite the kneejerk move toward austerity that most universities implemented in the beginning months of the pandemic, the university's endowment grew significantly. In August 2021, NYU reported that its endowment now stood at \$5.8 billion, an increase of over 20 percent from the year before.⁹ Perhaps private universities, under pressure, can be made to release a few crumbs of treasure. Then again, we are still waiting, a year after the ratification of our contract, for our backpay.

The hoarded riches at NYU and Columbia stand in stark contrast to CUNY, the public school system that has been systematically underfunded by city and state governments for decades. For CUNY, the pandemic has meant only more austerity. Free tuition for all in the CUNY system was established amid the civil rights movement, and student and community militancy in the late 1960s secured open admissions. However, the city's 1975 fiscal crisis, and the austerity that followed, rolled back those wins. The racial and class demographic makeup of the student body became less diverse as result.¹⁰ Still, despite these losses, CUNY grad workers teach a student body that is far more socioeconomically and racially diverse than their private school counterparts. Meanwhile, CUNY grad workers make significantly less than their private school counterparts while being obligated to spend hours commuting to teach at colleges across the five boroughs. CUNY students have not had to fight for union recognition; they belong to the Professional Staff Congress (PSC), which represents faculty and staff at all levels of seniority. But the last PSC negotiations in 2019 produced a contract with only minimal gains for grad students and adjuncts. Those negotiations also produced a "7k or fight" campaign that pushed for pay parity—\$7k per course—with NYU/New School TA/adjunct rates, as well as "Rank and File Action," a group of union members that was critical of union leadership and has been committed to fighting austerity.¹¹ What happens at their next bargaining fight will depend not on persuading a rich institution to release some of its ill-gotten goods, but on the state legislature finally approving what activists have called a "New Deal for CUNY." It will also require tenured professors in the PSC to prioritize gains for grad workers.

Columbia: Shut it Down

Columbia and NYU's unionization efforts were deeply intertwined from the onset. In 2000, the NLRB ruled in favor of unionization of graduate student workers at NYU. Inspired by NYU's victory, Columbia research and teaching assistants held a union election two years later, but the ballots were never counted due to the aforementioned Brown decision of 2004, which allowed private universities to no longer bargain collectively with graduate student workers. Twelve years later the Student Workers of Columbia (SWC) (then known as the Graduate Workers of Columbia [GWC]) successfully petitioned the NLRB to overturn the Brown ruling—a victory that provided a framework for the current unionization fights today.¹² These legal battles became the most visible aspect of years of on-the-ground campus organizing and required the near-constant mobilization of new organizers.

With Brown overruled, it took a one-week strike in November 2019 for Columbia to recognize and bargain with the SWC. Unfortunately, their proposed bargaining

framework included an important caveat: the prohibition of any strike or slowdown until April 2020, in the name of negotiating in “good faith.” In practice this meant that SWC was bargaining with its hands tied behind its back, and the first year after recognition was marked by relentless intransigence by the administration, including the refusal to bargain over healthcare and arbitration. Nevertheless, following in the footsteps of GSOC, SWC committed to negotiate with the university in fully open bargaining, which meant that any member of the union could attend negotiations. By the end of our first year of bargaining, SWC membership overwhelmingly voted “yes” in a strike authorization vote—a testimony to the mobilizing effect of open bargaining and member participation.

Following the spring 2021 strike, which was delayed due to the pandemic and which the Bargaining Committee ended early, or “paused,” in exchange for mediation with the university, organizers were presented a tentative contract agreement that failed its workers in a number of important ways. The proposal cut a large portion of workers out of the unit, it offered compensation that in some cases left workers receiving pay below the rate of inflation, and it provided no alternative to the university’s Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action process in cases of discrimination and harassment. In response, rank-and-file members organized a strong campaign for non-ratification, with crucial support from GSOC, which released a statement urging the SWC Bargaining Committee to extend its rushed deliberation period, much like GSOC had done during their first contract ratification vote.¹³ In the end, SWC’s membership voted the contract down on April 30 and geared up for a new round of negotiations with the university.

Emboldened by the membership’s vote against ratification, SWC elected a new bargaining committee that was committed to rank-and-file participation in decision-making during the bargaining process. Newly formed working groups researched contract precedents, wrote tentative language, and participated in every step of bargaining. Meanwhile, the new bargaining committee was able to effectively use the membership’s rejection of the initial contract proposal in negotiations with the university by invoking the possibility that the membership might again reject a concessionary offer. Mobilized by these changes, SWC came prepared for a strong strike in the fall 2021, the first fully in-person semester since the pandemic.

Columbia’s administration retaliated. The pay structure for graduate students was “restructured” during the summer; by disbursing pay in weekly wages and bi-weekly stipends, the university impaired the capacity of student workers to plan ahead and financially sustain a long strike. That measure, combined with Columbia’s considerable endowment growth during the pandemic and the fees they spent on expensive lawyers, exposed the immense disparity of resources on the eve of the strike. Against the administration’s massive war chest, the student workers organized an effective hardship fund to supplement the crucial, but limited UAW strike pay. Nevertheless, SWC’s concrete goals kept its members willing to push forward, while Columbia’s refusal to move in negotiations suggested a strategy of starving out the mobilization. The stage for the long nine-week strike at Columbia was set.

The first SWC action planned for the strike was a walkout and rally scheduled to take place on October 27, 2021, a week before the strike deadline, so as to embolden on-campus militancy. After a string of speeches from organizers, a sizable audience of

student-workers and undergrad allies marched to the building where Columbia President Lee Bollinger was teaching his Free Speech seminar. SWC had planned to protest in front of the main entrance, but within minutes supportive undergraduates swarmed the building and interrupted Bollinger's class, prompting him to abandon the premises through a backdoor.¹⁴ This unexpected action was the opening salvo of a strike sustained by local solidarity, constant escalation, and a diversity of tactics.

Over a ten-week period, SWC organizers maintained a firm presence on campus with support from union allies and the local community. A march between Columbia's two main campuses on 168th Street and 116th Street called attention to the predatory nature of the university's expansion into Harlem, and student workers' resolve to remain on strike after Thanksgiving. After the university threatened that strikers would be "permanently replaced" the next academic year, faculty organized a rally opposing the university's retaliation, thus strengthening on-campus alliances. The university's retaliatory threats also sparked the boldest action of the strike: the complete shutdown of the Morningside campus on December 8. From 9am to 6pm, with robust support from city-wide allies, a hard picket surrounded every gate of the university, and classes were canceled or relocated.¹⁵

It is critical to remember that all of these escalating actions were not confirmations of traditional metrics in strike power. They were first and foremost re-mobilization tactics for the rank-and-file during a long strike, and constant reminders that the workers still had the numbers, and the resolve, to keep fighting. By ignoring the power assessment metrics of traditional union organizing, and instead relying on the continued mobilization of its members and strengthening wider alliances with labor and community activists, the SWC sustained a strike until the eve of the 2022 spring semester.

The tentative agreement reached in January 6, 2022, included a significant (though still inadequate) increase in childcare support, a neutral arbitration process in cases of discrimination and harassment, and a notable increase in stipends. In the end, the contract was ratified with 97.6 percent approval from the membership. Still, there are many struggles as SWC looks ahead. For example, in exchange for a recognition clause that accepted the full size of the unit, the contract included a weak membership clause. What's more, the approval of the contract did not mean that the university would relent in its union-busting practices. At the time of writing, SWC organizers are still fighting within their departments to obtain full back-pay for strikers and have the contract implemented equitably to confirm full recognition in practice. As in so many other labor struggles, a contract is only the beginning of a prolonged struggle for power at the workplace.

Dear Graduate Workers Organizing Their Universities: Notes from Union Struggles at the University of New Mexico

At the University of New Mexico (UNM), we learned that choosing which union to organize with is a critical decision. For three years, graduate student workers at UNM partnered with the Albuquerque chapter of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and the union's values of radical labor organizing became central to our early union campaign. Adopting the IWW's focus on political education, UNM

graduate workers established a commitment to the antifascist and anticapitalist principles of the IWW and gained a deeper understanding of the oppressive mechanisms that operate in neoliberal spaces. In addition, working with the IWW instilled a commitment to direct action and workplace mapping and helped us build an organizing committee that coordinated extensive organizer training. As graduate workers, we should not forget our class position; the IWW also reminds us that “the employing and laboring classes have nothing in common.”¹⁶ Graduate unions can be a space to counteract the proceduralism and meritocratic culture of the neoliberal university, which exploits us and can undermine our humanity.

Unfortunately, the IWW lacked the material resources, like paid staff and lawyers, that we needed to win a contract for graduate workers at UNM. Therefore, our campaign approached the United Electrical Workers (UE), and in early 2020, the president of UE flew to Albuquerque to talk with us about the specific benchmarks we would need to reach to get UE staff support. Shortly thereafter, we met with the UE again for advice about mobilizing during the COVID-19 pandemic. After these meetings, we voted and determined that UE was a good fit. As UNM faculty confronted resistance from university administrators during their unionization process the previous year, UE’s commitment to member-led unionism, its history of organizing victories, and its ability to provide a paid staff to help us in our campaign were fundamental to this choice.

As we began gathering graduate worker contacts, we realized our bargaining unit was much larger than we initially thought. After building our organizing committee to almost 10 percent of our bargaining unit in August 2020, UE sent us two paid staffers to help with our card drive. In September 2020, our organizing campaign went public. We announced our card drive on social media. The initial goal was to obtain union cards from at least 60 percent of the graduate workers at UNM. We reached that goal in November 2020 and within a month filed for recognition. In March 2021, we had our first hearing before the Public Employee Labor Relations Board (PELRB) to determine whether graduate workers would be considered “regular employees” of the university. Once again, we reaped the benefits of organizing with UE; a designated labor lawyer and a professional organizer helped us prepare our evidence and defense against the expensive union-busting lawyers hired by the university. In the end, we prevailed, despite the university’s opposition. We must not lose sight of the fact that we are not organizing just to complete tasks, or because of ideology only. Most graduate workers in New Mexico are living in precarity. In other words, we cannot afford defeat.

“The University Works because We Do”

Whereas many universities have used manipulative, intimidating, and misleading communication strategies to derail graduate worker union campaigns, both UNM and New Mexico State University (NMSU) have taken a slightly different approach. Under the counsel of Dina Holcomb, a union-busting lawyer in Albuquerque, administrators at both institutions sought to change the definition of work to suit their needs. After UGW-UE filed our petition for recognition to the PELRB on December 9, 2020, the university submitted a counter-petition disputing our legal

status as “regular employees” under the Public Employee Bargaining Act.¹⁷ A short time later, when Holcomb prepared an identical petition against NMSU grad workers, she did not bother to replace all instances of “UNM” with “NMSU.” In response to this union-busting strategy, our union has found that we must cultivate an identity as workers that extends beyond our workplaces. This realization has allowed UGW-UE to form coalitions with other unions on campus; for example, our union forged an alliance with UNM custodial workers in 2021.

At the PELRB hearing in early 2021, members of UGW-UE testified on the nature of their labor and its relationship to their own scholarship. Throughout the hearing, graduate workers, most of whom earn wages well below Albuquerque’s poverty line, explained to a lawyer who makes \$185 an hour that we do not grade student papers recreationally.¹⁸ Just as UNM and NMSU require teaching, grading, and research in order to function, so too do workers need food, shelter, and medical care. Our labor is an essential transaction that UNM and NMSU have attempted to portray as a form of mentorship, and low stipends reflect both universities’ unwillingness to hold up their end.

Our identity as workers connects our efforts to concurrent struggles at Starbucks and Amazon, as we are all ultimately fighting for dignity in our workplaces. Corporations tend to avoid the term “workers,” using instead euphemisms like “partners,” “associates,” and “team members” to undermine workplace concerns. UNM and NMSU follow this strategy in weaponizing the “professional mentorship” dimension of assistantships to undercut the legal rights of grad workers—whom they call “graduate learners.”¹⁹

This process is emblematic of the neoliberalization of universities and the “casualization of academic labor.”²⁰ University labor practices impact professors and graduate teaching assistants alike, which highlights the need for unions to represent all university workers. When administration and departments slot graduate students into assistantships without proper training or adequate pay, under the pretense of “skills development,” that labor is financially and socially devalued for all involved. This is why cross-workplace solidarity is essential.

Memes, Infographics, and Emails: Online Strategies of @UNMgradworkers

Our union efforts began to accelerate at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Similar to what happened in Michigan and New York, UNM’s response to the pandemic agitated graduate workers. However, covid presented other challenges to our organizing—most notably, an inability to connect in person with colleagues, which is a crucial step in unionizing. Thus, effective online organizing became central to our union’s early work.

Social media helped us quickly rally community and national support for our union campaign, and once our campaign was public, we began the online push by sharing photos of new union members signing their cards. Anonymous testimonials described workplace mistreatment. Educational infographics with information regarding our union efforts and the union-busting campaign the university was waging agitated our audience. These research-based infographics reached hundreds of new supporters and graduate workers, boosting the union campaign. A key element

of our graphic strategy was utilizing a shareable and agitating first tile to grab the attention of potential members and supporters.

UGW-UE quickly discovered that social media is a tool that can be used in conjunction with other more traditional tools, such as one-on-one conversations, phone calls, emails, and group meetings. Yet regardless of our medium, a key factor in our success was our strong messaging about the collective struggle of grad workers. This consistency also helped draw in hesitant colleagues and create trust. While organizing during the pandemic has been daunting, strategically utilizing online tools has been successful and remains an essential part of our movement.

Message vs. Material Conditions: UNM and “Minority-Serving Institution” Rhetoric

A key argument we have made is that a graduate worker union will increase graduate minority enrollment and success rates. We have communicated to the UNM administration, our members, and our communities that part of our union’s vision is to make higher education more equitable. Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students face higher barriers to success in graduate school.²¹ They are less likely to have financial support from their families and often struggle to secure graduate employment due to a lack of institutional knowledge and professional connections. For those reasons, UGW-UE has questioned what it means for UNM to be a “Hispanic-serving, minority institution.” The US Department of Education defines minority institutions of higher education as those with minority enrollment over 50 percent, and UNM is eager to advertise itself as such. Yet we have exposed the contradictions of UNM’s “minority-serving” rhetoric; the university undermines its “equity-oriented” goals when it pays minority graduate workers roughly \$8,000 less than what would constitute a “living wage.”²²

According to the 2021 US Census, roughly 63 percent of New Mexico’s population identifies as a racial minority and the state has the third highest poverty rate in the United States. UNM is the flagship university in New Mexico and is one of only fourteen Research 1 universities that are Hispanic-serving institutions, meaning Hispanic enrollment of at least 25 percent.²³ It is also one of four Research 1 universities that is a minority-serving institution. Thus, UNM claims the incredible responsibility of serving the minority and disadvantaged populations of New Mexico.

UNM’s minority enrollment significantly drops between undergraduate and graduate programs. For example, in spring 2022, there was a 22-point difference between minority enrollment in undergraduate and graduate programs.²⁴ This indicates a higher barrier to entry for graduate school for minority students compared to undergraduate programs. Considering these enrollment statistics and our lived experiences as graduate workers, it is clear that while UNM’s advertising proudly states it is “Hispanic-serving,” it has much more work to do to uplift minority and working-class students.

In board of regents meetings, media interviews, and rallies, UGW-UE has argued that UNM must take an active role in reducing financial barriers to completing graduate school for it to advertise as a “minority-serving institution” rather than using the state’s large minority population to receive national accolades without investing in minority graduate students. Higher assistantship stipends, better healthcare coverage,

and protections against harassment, discrimination, and overwork are necessary to support minority graduate students. This potent message has put public pressure on university administrators to stop wasting resources on union-busting and bargain with UGW-UE to better support minority graduate students.

Closing: Normalcy vs. Struggle

At the start of this essay, we referenced the long emails that university administrations distributed at the beginning of the pandemic. At the time of writing, we are traversing the era that these emails had predicted and that the universities are now loudly celebrating: the so-called “return to normalcy.” We have no interest in litigating what “normalcy” entails, but we know that what constitutes “normal” for the employer is never in the interest of the workers. For the neoliberal university—whether it is affiliated with the state or more akin to a real estate baron—normalcy entails further casualization of academic labor, departmental austerity, ending accommodations to protect people from the ongoing pandemic, and fierce confrontation with movements seeking to overturn the status quo.

Over the last two years, despite the varying conditions of our struggles, each of our movements has rejected the neoliberal university’s longing for the status quo. We have also rejected the traditional shape of higher education. We have no pretense that any of our movements are headed into a more peaceful, collaborative relationship with our administrations. Our vision of the future is distinct from theirs. Rather than prepare for normalcy, we will continue to deepen our solidarities with one another, encourage faculty to struggle alongside us, build more lines of solidarity amongst precarious workers within our institutions, and build power outside of our campuses with adjacent social movements. Most importantly, we seek to lay waste to whatever a “normal” state of things entails within the neoliberal university. We invite you to join us!

Notes

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