

## Graduate Student Unions: Further Considerations

To the Editor:

Should Graduate Student Academic Employees (GSAEs) become unionized? In the January 1997 issue of *Perspectives*, Gregory Beyrer argued in their favor. "Regardless of any other relationship that exists between an employee and an employer, both parties still have a connection that resolves around pay for work done," he asserted. ("In Favor of Unions for Graduate Students," *Perspectives*, January 1997). Beyrer's argument rests on his belief in "the right of all labor to organize." In other words, the GSAE status supersedes that of student. Beyrer also argues that unions would allow the faculty to "concentrate on their teaching and research without worrying about how workplace issues might disrupt their relationship with teaching assistants, readers, or research assistants." Disputes would presumably be handled by a third party outside the department. Finally, Beyrer believes that "an improved standard of living for GSAEs would mean that faculty would not have to worry about the kinds of emergencies that could adversely affect the conduct of research or teaching." In short, Beyrer feels that "bread and butter" issues interfere with a GSAE's ability to do a good job.

I found Beyrer's article to be rather smug and lacking in a full understanding of the complexity of unionization. It is a serious issue that requires a full discussion of all its possible effects. It will affect the relationships between faculty and GSAE, faculty and university administration, GSAE and university administration, and GSAE and graduate students not employed by the university. Moreover, Beyrer does not adequately disarm the University of California's argument that a special relationship exists between GSAEs and the university because of their status as students.

I question Beyrer's rather optimistic view of how unionization will thwart potential friction between the faculty and the GSAEs.

One is left to wonder how workplace issues can be settled if the university is unable or unwilling to meet the demands of GSAEs. "These issues pertain only to the relationship between GSAEs and the university administration, and not to the alliance between professor and teaching assistant," Beyrer writes. In short, he argues that faculty should be removed from workplace

tion and the relations between students and administration and therefore should not be excluded from this issue. Moreover, unions would significantly affect decision-making in the department. Who would get these jobs and for how long? What would be the procedure for removing a GSAE? Who will assign assistants to specific teachers? These are just several questions that

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issues because they do not have a stake in their outcome. But any union call for a strike, sit-down, boycott, or lawsuit would undoubtedly affect the classroom, and the relations between professor and assistant could conceivably become quite ugly. Faculty does have an interest in unioniza-

tion can be raised regarding authority, and each of them poses the possibility of friction between the faculty and the students. Any plan for unionization must address and

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## Unions and Universities: The Perils of Organizing Graduate Students

To the Editor:

Gregory Beyrer's recent essay, "In Favor of Unions for Graduate Students," enters the increasingly spirited national debate about student labor and campus unionizing ("In Favor of Unions for Graduate Students," *Perspectives*, January 1997.) In numerous journals, on electronic mail, and at universities all across the nation, more graduate students than ever are singing in praise of graduate-student organizing, a chorus to which Beyrer harmoniously lends his voice. However little work culture we might share with more traditional laborers, he suggests, teaching assistants and graders make obvious financial contributions to university life. As such, they deserve the right to bargain for increased security, health insurance, and fair wage rates. Asserting his belief in "the right of all labor to organize," Beyrer proffers a simple, but powerful, idea: we work, therefore we organize.

For me, Beyrer's case is both welcome and worrisome. On one hand, I applaud his careful assessment of graduate labor. Clearly, many students, faculty, and administrators undervalue the economic contributions that accompany the presence of teaching assistants and graders in the classroom, and thus remain skeptical about union organizing.

Recently, for instance, I was discussing this issue with a fellow graduate student. As a child of struggling, working-class parents, she told me, the virtues of organized labor were manifest early in her life. Nonetheless, the prospect of a union of graduate students disturbed her. Certainly proletarians should organize their interests when faced with layoffs, pay cuts, or eroding control of their work milieu. But why, she challenged, did I believe that graduate students should do the same? Insisting that graduates are not really workers—at least not the kind with whom she was raised—she concluded that they are apprentices, and lucky ones at that. Beyrer's argument is a persuasive rejoinder to my otherwise pro-labor friend, who articulates the familiar and bedeviling problem of hybridization.

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discuss these issues before committing to organization.

Conspicuously absent from Beyrer's discussion is any mention of how unionization would benefit graduate students that are not employed by the university—those that have to seek "extramural" work to solve the "bread and butter issues." In the counsels of the university, unions would give an unfair advantage to those students that are GSAEs over those that are not; GSAEs would have an added voice with the university administration that the other students would not benefit from. Graduate students should not be divided into two classes potentially at odds with each other. Moreover, the funds needed for increased pay and medical benefits would most likely come from a source that would hurt these other students. Withdrawal from dwindling general scholarship funds or from tuition and general fee increases are likely sources. Perhaps funding will be deducted from other necessary services, such as money previously budgeted for library purchases. The university might also decrease the number of GSAEs in order to provide wage increases, thereby limiting the opportunity for students to apply for these coveted positions and increasing the workloads of the remaining GSAEs or faculty. One more possibility is that the university would decrease faculty positions. The job market is tough enough without students making it more difficult by drying up their potential reservoir of employment.

Beyrer summarily dismissed the University of California's claim that the GSAEs are primarily students and that their role as employees is secondary. The university argued that a special relationship does exist, the basis of their denial of GSAE unionization. Factually, the university is correct: one cannot apply for a GSAE position unless one is a student. It is not like a janitorial job, for example, for which anyone can walk in off the street and apply. Also, the GSAE is a training position. The job provides students with an opportunity to see the inside machinations of the department and learn how to prepare for and execute classroom discussions. Many professions have their temporary periods of low or no pay apprenticeships; history should not be an exception.

I do not deny labor's right to organize, but it is another matter altogether whether or

not GSAE unionization is wise or prudent. A special relationship does exist between the university and the GSAEs. Employment is contingent upon their status as students and seeking it aids their education with practical experience. It is not a job for its own ends; it is a training position and part and parcel of a graduate education. Unions pose a threat to graduate students who are not GSAEs. In terms of resources and influence, it is the graduate student that works outside of the university that stands to lose the most by unionization. It would be most

unfortunate to divide graduate students who share common goals and professional aspirations into two separate and unequal classes. Professors, too, have little to really gain by unionization; there will be a loss of departmental authority and an increase in interference in classroom operations. Any students seeking to unionize must take all of these considerations into account before they do so.

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On the other hand, Beyrer's analysis is problematic for a couple of reasons. First, he too easily assumes that conditions similar to those at UCLA, his school, prevail among small and private universities. Graduate students in locations without an active labor movement, for example, might have more difficulty garnering the resources than he allows. Moreover, while the recent labor activism at big, state-run schools inspires promise and more than a little excitement, it is worth remembering that of the 12 recognized graduate-student

In the rush to construct an economic *raison d'être* for graduate unions, however, Beyrer forgets to mention that universities are not supposed to be large businesses, that the democratic claims of education should not be given over to the pecuniary reasoning of the marketplace. Short-term agitation for wages and job security are essential, but union campaigns focused solely on these issues threaten to elide the distinctions between business and campus, differences surely worth preserving. "The issues that concern GSAEs are strictly workplace issues, not academic issues," Beyrer affirms. "They consist of bread-

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unions, none belong to a private institution. That may be changing, as the recent agitation at Yale University and other private schools suggests. Still, what of medium- and small-sized universities, where teaching assistants are too few to command bargaining power, where graduate organizations do not enjoy the leverage conferred by threats of grade-strikes and other weapons of large constituencies? Any movement to organize these campuses must be sensitive to such particularities.

These questions aside, some disturbing implications reside in Beyrer's framework of analysis. The purpose of unions, he suggests, is the "protection of workers." Just compensation, improved health care, job security, and perhaps an improved standard of living—all these, in the custody of organized labor, are essential to the maintenance of a productive and contented workforce.

and-butter concerns . . ." Narrowly conceived in this way, the argument for graduate unions indeed risks mimicking the rhetoric of corporate-minded administrators, too willingly acceding to the incorporation of American universities.

Why not academic issues? We must demand that the university function as something better than "knowledge factories," to use Clark Kerr's inglorious phrase, where market logic invades classroom rituals, cafeteria dining, and health-care options, where corporations shape curriculum according to their short-term needs, where undergraduates pose as consumers, and where professors sign away proprietary rights to their research to business sponsors. To accept uncritically graduate-student hybridization is to lose sight of the peculiarities of universities, and particularly to diminish the humane imperatives of higher education. Beyrer is assuredly correct to note that the "protec-



tion of workers is the main purpose" of unions. But his framework neglects to include a question equally germane: what is the "main purpose" of a university?

Here at the University of Rochester—a campus undergoing reorganization to restore profitability—the president has deployed idioms more appropriate to a downsizing corporation. Indeed, "carefully redirecting our resources and energy" has not only meant reducing certain graduate programs, but shrinking the undergraduate population and privatizing many campus services; the latter move ostensibly will save the university on wages and health benefits, but threatens the health of the larger community. The university is among the largest and most influential employers in the city. Nevertheless, as Ralph Nader wryly commented during a visit here last semester, "they're going to be outsourcing everything but the students at this university."

Many graduate students here fret about these developments, yet their concerns have not been heard. They were not invited to participate in the plan's conception or implementation, as the existing graduate organization, heretofore a social group, was not consulted until after the announcement, when it was permitted a single meeting with administration officials. Subsequent attempts to question the wisdom of the plan have been met with controlled antagonism; merely the idea of forming a graduate-student union here, an associate dean recently warned me, is "outrageous." Nevertheless, many continue to worry that the direction set by the administration imperils the ideal of a humane, liberal education, and that excluding students from participation in the university erodes the democratic sensibility.

Would Beyrer's argument appeal to graduate students at Rochester? That is, would an organizing drive waged exclusively on "bread-and-butter concerns like wages, working hours, and medical insurance" bear fruit here? Perhaps, but probably not. We are a medium-sized, private school without large numbers of teaching assistants, and our problems transcend our status as workers. More likely, economic issues would arouse interest if they were linked to a careful, and more radical, commentary on the incorporation of our education.

Without question, then, graduate students here and elsewhere should assert their rights as workers, but they must also

insist on preserving the university milieu as a hallowed province of inquiry and imagination. This strategy affords activists at small and private schools a key role; although they usually do not enjoy access to the resources available at state-run systems, they can still remind administrators that corporate logic should not be allowed to diminish the ideals embedded in a liberal education. Coupling real economic grievances with a democratic appraisal of the university also promises to broaden interest-based union drives and to affirm the cause of participatory democracy.

To this end, organizers must consider alliances with faculty, undergraduates, and most important, with community activists and labor leaders. Whether researching university contracts with corporations, assessing standards of living, available health options, and housing arrangements; measuring the influence of business leaders on campus; understanding the political machinery of local municipalities; figuring ways to allow graduate students greater participation in university life; or questioning the affiliations of board members—all these enterprises will profit immensely if organizers work alongside activists and labor groups practiced in negotiating local politics in a common project to decentralize power.

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## A Disgraceful Betrayal of Intellectual Values

To the Editor:

The nation is turning its back on affirmative action, and many historians like myself long ago turned our backs to the AHA, mostly out of inability to tolerate any longer the irresponsible and hypocritical nonsense one reads in the statement on affirmative action in the January *Perspectives*.

The authors of this are so obtusely politically correct that they are not even aware they need present any defense of affirmative action beyond the recital of a few weary slogans about "diversity." It never occurs to them that the rational and equitable procedure is to have groups within a profession represented according to their membership in the pool of qualified applicants, not their percentage in the total U.S. population. It never occurs to them that intellectual and scholarly professions

Organizing graduate students anywhere, of course, can seem like an overwhelming endeavor. Many remain skeptical about our status as workers and dubious about prospects for democratizing universities; and we cannot forget that graduate school universally means heavy workloads, lots of pressure, and extended instability. Add the radical skepticism that pervades contemporary humanism and a more general sense of the languor of American democracy, and it is no wonder few are willing to commit either the time or the emotional energy necessary for union drives.

I certainly do not wish to make the task any more difficult. I do want to suggest, however, that conducting narrowly focused organizing campaigns may not be the best way to resist the incorporation of American universities, that acquiescing to proletarian status perhaps raises as many questions as it answers. Our project instead demands that we link the moral imagination and the democratic spirit to contemporary dissent about wages, health care, and similar issues. We must examine, in other words, not only how universities are functioning, but how we think they should behave. Proceed, comrades, but be careful what you wish for.

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requiring years of specialized training, and dedicated to the preservation of a priceless cultural heritage, might be treated somewhat differently from, say, garbage collectors.

They do not hesitate to demand that groups that produce relatively few Ph.D.'s should still receive preferential hiring, which obviously means that the less qualified will be hired and the highly qualified suffer discrimination. This would have been a disgraceful betrayal of intellectual values at any time. At the present time, when the academic job market would have been harrowing anyway, it means that the cream of an entire generation of historians is being sacrificed. For some time to come, those responsible for this systematic impoverishment will keep on bleating to us about how "diversification" has "enriched historical inquiry." But now just about everybody understands what it is they really mean.

Doyle Dawson