

The Graduate Students' Union 1983-84
A position paper

File
Adjuncts

When the Graduate Students' Union was formed late in 1982, and officially chartered by the Doctoral Students' Council shortly thereafter, it had two clearly defined aims in view :

to advance the interests of CUNY graduate students as employees or prospective parttime employees of the university, by pressing for the improvement of the conditions of adjuncts, university fellows and graduate assistants and exploring the various possible ways of accomplishing this, both within and outside of the Professional Staff Congress, the faculty union which currently 'represents' us;

and, secondly, to serve as a 'friends of the DSC', that is, to help further the interests of grad students as students by working, in concert with the DSC but often by different means, on issues affecting students such as child care, health insurance, opposition to the 'college association' scheme and so on.

The formulation of these two aims arose from an awareness that there were, and would continue to be serious impediments and limitations to the effectiveness of student representation in the policy-making and administrative levels of the university (at 80th street, on the 18th floor and in the departments). The powers-that-be had long since taken it upon themselves to determine unilaterally the conditions of student life - 'with your best interests in mind', as they never tire of assuring us. Student representation was and is an afterthought. This applies to the university administrative structure, but equally to that of the PSC.

The GSU came about at the time when the 'college association' scheme first became an issue and a threat. Many of us, including the then-officers of the DSC, were disturbed at the possibilities this raised of shrinking even further the strained and faint student voice in university affairs. The officers of the DSC welcomed and even urged the formation of the GSU as a student group concerned with the issues affecting all graduate students at CUNY, yet able and willing to mobilize and exert pressure of a kind and in a way which would be impractical and inappropriate to the DSC's role as student liaison and 'official channel' to the administration, and also to the departments.

Since its formation the GSU has been involved in a variety of organizing efforts and events at the Graduate Center. We worked together with the DSC on a health insurance proposal in the spring of 1983. We were involved in the child-care coalition. At the beginning of this semester we organized a 'reorientation' to focus attention on some of the chartered organizations and some of the significant issues 'on campus'. About one hundred students participated in that meeting and the party afterward. Throughout this period we have maintained a strong and active membership and have had regular membership meetings throughout.

The single issue that has absorbed most of our attention, however, has been the conditions of employment of part-timers within the university, and their misrepresentation by the Professional Staff Congress. So far we have:

met several times with officials on various levels, of the PSC, to try to urge on them the severity and justice of our grievances. These attempts proved frustrating and fruitless;

held discussions with the Association of Part-time Faculty, a group of adjuncts active within the PSC. Although we agree on many issues, they are not willing to attempt an organizing drive outside the confines of the PSC;

did a considerable amount of research on the legal and technical issues surrounding an organizing drive: this involved meetings with lawyers and also

with union activists and officials;

we consulted with students who are completing the organization of a SUNY Graduate Student Employees' Union and we are encouraged by their success.

We have concluded that graduate student and part-time employees will make progress only when they have openly established their separate community of interest, the failure of the PSC to represent that interest, and the willingness of graduate students and part-time instructional and research staff to guarantee that their interest is represented. The most effective way of registering our exasperation is through a decertification campaign. This means, essentially, that part-time research and instructional staff put the PSC on notice that, unless we are taken seriously and our needs are met, we will form our own union to represent us in collective bargaining with the university. Such a decertification campaign will :

be a gauge of part-time employees' sentiments and needs, as well as helping to inform them of the legal issues and of the options available to them;

send a message to the union that their evasions and inaction have become intolerable;

begin to coalesce an organization of graduate students and part-time employees on a university-wide scale, which is essential to any attempts at improving our conditions;

accumulate a volume of organizing experience and necessary legal and organizational expertise;

prepare the basis for the creation of an independent union, if necessary.

A decertification campaign is never a happy affair - it is the rejection of an established union and its policies, a declaration that a new beginning must be made. The PSC enjoys a comfortable relationship with CUNY: but it is predicated on safeguarding the interests of full-time tenured faculties and retirees above all. The PSC has made no effort to organize part-timers nor to bring them into the life of the union. As things stand, the PSC can do without an organized adjunct and part-time employees' presence, and will resist representing part-time faculty's interest.

Meanwhile, the number of adjuncts and part-timers in CUNY keeps growing, in keeping with a national trend in higher education. The Board of Regents recently rescinded a rule requiring 50% of faculty to be full time. As the university comes more and more to rely on part-timers, organizing them becomes more and more imperative.

Part-time faculty and adjuncts have been increasingly successful in organizing their own independent unions. Such unions exist in many parts of the country; locally, there is an Adjunct Faculty Association at Nassau Community College. The graduate assistants at four of the SUNY colleges are now successfully completing an organizing drive.

The GSU is proposing an organizing drive, with other students, to attempt the formation of a Part-Time Instructional and Research Staff Union. To carry out such a drive, we need to be represented by lawyers, since the struggle is, in part, a legal one. Sipser, Weinstock, Harper & Dorn is a firm with the knowledge and experience we need.