

HARVARD GRADUATE STUDENT UNION - HGSU.ORG

What is a graduate worker union and how can it help me?

A union is an organization of graduate workers who come together to build power, create a democratic workplace, and negotiate to improve their working conditions. Its existence, leaders, and structure have been voted on by a majority of grad workers in the university. An elected bargaining committee of grad workers periodically negotiate a binding contract with the university, and by bargaining collectively are able to win far larger benefits than any individual could achieve on their own.

Once our union is recognized, we elect a bargaining committee of graduate workers, and fill out bargaining surveys to set the priorities in our contract, which can include anything the union's members feel is important, but often emphasizes:

- Contractually guaranteed annual **cost of living** stipend increases and timely payments
- Enhanced **dental, vision, and mental health** insurance (and lower co-pays)
- Improved access to insurance coverage for **partners and dependents**
- **Expanded funding beyond fifth year**
- **Tuition and fee remission** for fifth year and beyond
- **Standardized teaching requirements** (such as smaller section sizes, better section assignment procedures, and workload guidelines)
- **Vacation and sick leave** for research assistants
- Subsidized **child care** and **parental leave** (including retaining student status while on leave, which can mean retaining visa status, health insurance, and access to university facilities)
- Subsidized **university housing**
- Subsidized **transportation**
- Protections against discriminatory **hiring and admissions, sexual harassment and assault**
- Improved **disability access** and **resources for minorities**
- Establishment of a transparent **grievance procedure**

Voice. Unions give graduate workers real and meaningful representation in how the university operates. In an era of increasing academic corporatization and reliance on adjuncts over tenured faculty, graduate worker unions give us a powerful voice in determining the future and values of the university as our workplace.

Security. Graduate workers are particularly vulnerable, and unions provide a safety net to prevent grads from falling through the cracks of funding and bureaucracy.

Community. Unions are centered on the graduate community, and can be powerful spaces for building relationships across disciplines and departments premised on the foundation of grads supporting grads.

Power. By joining together, we can use our voice to change the direction of Harvard, and ensure graduate employees' contribution to the success of the University is compensated and respected.

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How is a union different from the Graduate Student Council (GSC)?

The graduate student council exists to fund student groups, award grants, sponsor student life, and have regular meetings with university administrators. Though the GSC can communicate concerns to the administration, it has **no power to negotiate any binding decision** on behalf of the graduate body, and the administration is **under no obligation to act** on any recommendations or requests that the GSC might make.

Can graduate workers form unions at private universities?

Yes! **We always have the right to organize** to improve our working conditions. However, due to U.S. labor law, private universities are not currently obligated to recognize or negotiate with graduate workers. This may soon change.

While graduate worker unionization at public universities is governed by state labor law--and many states, including Massachusetts, explicitly recognize graduate workers' right to unionize--private universities are governed by federal law. The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) is the federal body that decides whether graduate workers are 'employees,' and thus whether universities must negotiate with them. The NLRB has changed its mind several times on this matter. Since 2004, the NLRB has held that graduate workers are not employees; however, grads from Columbia and the New School recently filed petitions seeking to overturn the current ruling. Hearings started on March 31, 2015, but there is no decision yet.

Can we unionize if the NLRB refuses to reverse its decision?

Yes. In exchange for withdrawing a petition before the NLRB, graduates at New York University, a private institution, received voluntary recognition of their union from the NYU administration. In their December 2013 vote, **98.4% of NYU graduates' ballots cast were in favor of a union**. Although the university was not required by law to recognize the union and negotiate a contract, the administration chose to do so.

Grads at NYU recently negotiated a new contract with the university in which they won cost of living increases, free dental insurance, tax-free childcare, and fee waivers of around \$900 per student. They were able to win voluntary recognition because they had strong graduate support and continued to take action to make the university respect their decision to form a union.

Will it affect my visa status if the NLRB decides grad workers are 'employees'?

No. This is a classification of U.S. labor law, not immigration law. Graduate worker unions exist across the United States, and they do not affect student visa status. Because of the structure of the U.S. government, definitions of 'student' and 'employee' are made separately by each federal agency.

Why organize with an international labor union?

Usually graduate workers choose to affiliate with a larger labor union such as the United Automobile Workers (UAW), which began as an auto workers union in the 1930s but now also represents workers in service industries, non-profits, and university positions such as staff and research and teaching assistants. By organizing with a union like the UAW (which represents organized students at NYU as well as the Universities of Massachusetts, California, Washington, and Connecticut) grad workers join our power with hundreds of thousands of other members across the country, and gain access to extended resources and opportunities. These often include access to labor lawyers, paid organizing positions for grads, and professional training to help ensure we have the strongest union and best contract possible.

Will I have to go on strike?

Strikes are the last resort in the contract negotiation process, and are a way that graduate workers can **demonstrate our power to the university** in order to improve our working conditions. If we were to decide a strike was necessary, we would vote to go on strike. In the UAW, **two thirds of votes cast** must be in favor of a strike before we could do so. Typically graduate worker strikes take the form of refusing to turn in grades to the administration.

But I feel like my life is pretty good...

Without a union you may have it good right now, but **Harvard could make a change at any time**, without considering your concerns, and you have **no recourse**. This has happened to many grad workers at Harvard already. With a union, we get to negotiate a contract which is enforceable which would **protect the benefits we like**, and improve in the other areas. If you have it good, then it is in your best interest to join the union to help prevent cuts which so many of us have seen recently. Graduate unions are also organizing for better working conditions and benefits nationwide, and by standing together with tens of thousands of other grads we are part of a national movement.

How will unionization affect my relationship with my advisor/PI?

When we vote to form our union, we will elect graduate workers at Harvard to sit across the table from Harvard's administrators to negotiate our contract. When it is done, we will then vote to accept that contract. Our union will give us a direct line to the administration to deal with our grievances, rather than forcing our advisors to figure out how to solve problems. This would allow grads' relationships with our advisors to be about mentorship and research.

Contrary to what administrators often claim, being unionized does not harm research or academic freedom.¹ By giving grads a voice in the university's policy-making process, unions can empower grads to have a say in funding structures, lab conditions, class sizes, and

¹ Sean E. Rogers, Adrienne E. Eaton and Paula B. Voos, "Effects of Unionization on Graduate Student Employees: Faculty Student Relations, Academic Freedom, and Pay" *ILR Review* 66:2 (2013).

academic requirements, instead of depending on administrators to make these decisions based on their own criteria.

What have grad workers unions achieved at other universities?

- This year, NYU won a \$35,000 stipend with teaching, medical coverage up to \$4,300 for dependent spouses and \$3,700 for children, and a tax-free child-care fund that begins at \$60,000 starting Jan 1, 2016 and increasing \$10,000 each calendar year up to \$100,000.²
- After an eight day strike in 2014, the University of Oregon Graduate Teaching Fellows won a 10% wage increase, two weeks of paid family or medical leave, and a \$150,000 'hardship fund' from which students can receive grants for family and medical purposes.³
- In 2001, GSOC-UAW at NYU won the first ever collective bargaining agreement at a private university, which marked major improvements in stipends and free health care (2002) with expanded coverage (2003).⁴
- In March 2015, NYU grads renegotiated their contract for free basic dental insurance, a 4% raise, and funds for childcare and family health care.⁵
- In 1991, graduates at UMass Amherst negotiated their first contract, and since then they have won free health insurance, subsidized child care, a dental plan, tuition and fee waivers, a reasonable workload, more than doubled the minimum stipend, and a grievance procedure.⁶
- In their recently ratified 2015 contract UMass Amherst's grads won access to gender neutral bathrooms near grads' places of work, an affirmative action hiring committee to advocate for more people of color and other underrepresented categories, and paid family and medical leave.⁷
- Since graduate workers at the University of Washington unionized in 2002, they have obtained benefits such as the right to a neutral arbitrator for workplace disputes, additional compensation for or relief from overtime as a graduate assistant, and an average increase in graduate assistant wages of 34%.⁸
- Since its founding in 2007, Graduate Students United at the University of Chicago has campaigned for and won a doubling of teaching assistant salaries, better standards of care at the Student Care Center, and the right for students on parental leave to retain their student status,⁹ allowing the retention of visa status, health insurance, and access to university facilities.

² NYU contract process serves as framework for Columbia graduate workers seeking union recognition, <http://columbiaspectator.com/news/2015/04/02/nyu-contract-process-serves-framework-columbia-graduate-students-seeking-union>

³ UO-GTFF Collective Bargaining Agreement, <http://gtff3544.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/GTFF-Contract-2014-16-Final.pdf>

⁴ "Collective Bargaining Agreement" http://www.makingabetternyu.org/gsocuaw/wpcontent/uploads/gsoc_contract2001.pdf

⁵ Avi Asher-Schapiro, "NYU's Graduate Student Union Just Won a Historic Contract," *The Nation*, March 11, 2015. <http://www.thenation.com/article/201105/nyus-graduate-student-union-just-won-historic-contract>

⁶ UAW Local 2322 "Graduate Employee Organization" <http://uaw2322.prometheuslabor.com/graduateemployeeorganization>

⁷ "3/12/15 GEO Bargaining Update" http://www.geouaw.org/?page_id=2976#3/12/15

⁸ "How Collective Bargaining has improved the ASE experience" <http://www.uaw4121.org/wpcontent/uploads/2014/03/HowCollectiveBargaininghasimprovedtheASEexperienceTable.pdf>

⁹ "Graduate Students United: FAQ" <http://uchicagogsu.org/faq/>

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