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Abstract

A 2016 NLRB decision that made graduate labor unions legal has contributed significantly to a wave of graduate organizing, continuing a 50-year history of graduate unions. This research investigates this contemporary wave of graduate unionization using two papers, which take a theoretical and an empirical approach respectively. The first paper uses a Marxist analysis to connect the narrow antagonism between graduates and management with larger-scale phenomena that involves other workers too, such as the growing population of contingent academic workers. It describes how corporate interests have influenced higher education and administrators have become managers of workers in order to help serve capitalist interests. The second paper is an empirical investigation into the strategies that graduate unions are pursuing in this third wave of graduate union organizing, based on interviews from twelve graduates from eight different unions across the country. Graduate organizers discussed their unions' experiences of building and maintaining an organization that represents and forwards the interests of the body of graduate workers at their institutions, as well as how their unions are connecting with other communities and developing broader targets for action. The goal of these papers is to understand the nature of contemporary graduate employment as well as to develop insights that organizers have gained in their experiences organizing in unions.

THE THIRD WAVE OF GRADUATE LABOR UNIONS

by

Anthony Walker

B.A., Vassar College, 2017

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Master of Arts in Geography

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Introduction

I first became interested in graduate worker unions when I attended a rally outside Hendricks Chapel at Syracuse University protesting a provision in the 2017 Republican Tax Bill that would eliminate the tax exemption for graduate workers' tuition waivers. The rally was organized by Syracuse Graduate Employees United (SGEU), a group of graduate workers attempting to establish a union with support from Service Employees International United. Speakers discussed the impact that a potential several thousand dollar increase in taxes would have on graduates. They connected the proposed bill to a wide range of existing experiences working at an increasingly corporatized university. Graduate unions across the country held similar actions in protest of this tax on tuition waivers, and ultimately the provision was removed from the final version of the bill. Attending the rally opened my eyes to the exploitation of my peers on campus and around the country – and the movement to challenge the direction of universities with graduate worker unions. I signed a union card and got involved.

At the time, I was looking for a community that I could contribute to in a meaningful way through my master's research. After failed attempts to connect with other communities that I admired from the outside, it occurred to me that I could focus on a community that I myself had just joined. As a graduate worker myself, I felt well positioned to develop a research agenda that could benefit the movement to organize graduate workers. Initially I focused on how my work could support SGEU's campaign to unionize graduates at my own university. As my interests and knowledge evolved, I recognized a lack of academic research on contemporary graduate organizing in the U.S.. After attending the annual Coalition of Graduate Employees Unions

conference in summer 2018 in New York City, I established the research agenda for this research project.

Graduate unionization has over a 50-year history, which can be roughly divided into three waves. In the late 1960s, graduate workers first organized campaigns at universities including University of Wisconsin-Madison, which ratified the first contract for graduate workers in the world in 1970. There was another wave of graduate union campaigns in the 1990s and early 2000s, invigorated in 2000 when the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) first recognized the right for graduate workers at private universities to unionize, though it was overturned in 2004. A 2016 NLRB decision that again made graduate unions legal has contributed significantly to a third wave of graduate organizing.

The first paper uses a Marxist analysis to connect the narrow antagonism between graduates and management with larger-scale phenomena that involves other workers too, such as the growing population of contingent academic workers. I describe how corporate interests have influenced higher education and administrators have become managers over workers in order to help serve capitalist interests. I argue that class interests therefore animate the relationship between graduate workers and their employers. My primary aim is to strengthen readers' understanding of the past experiences of graduate unions and the conditions that have made the unionization of graduates necessary. I also hope that a Marxist class analysis illuminates some elements of graduate workers' structural position at universities and convinces readers of the need to adopt an adversarial disposition toward university managements and the underlying forces that exploit graduate labor.

My second paper is an empirical investigation into the strategies that graduate unions are pursuing in this third wave of graduate union organizing. I interviewed twelve graduates from

eight different unions across the country to illuminate the strategies used by graduate organizers for successful organizing with labor unions. Graduate organizers discussed their unions' experiences of building and maintaining an organization that represents and forwards the interests of the body of graduate workers at their institutions, as well as how their unions are connecting with other communities and developing broader targets for action. The goal of this paper is to compile and share strategies that graduate unions have developed and insights that organizers have gained, in order that graduates can learn from one another.

These papers are meant to approach both sides of the structure/agency debate. The first investigates graduates' structural position within universities, while the second focuses on the agency of workers to develop organizations and capacities capable of changing the structural positions. After all, the overall aim of this research is to contribute to the praxis of graduate union organizing – using theoretical concepts to inform action, and reflecting on experience to build theory. In this pursuit, I hope to make this research accessible to those interested in contemporary labor organizing in higher education. I plan to submit both of these articles to *Workplace: A Journal For Academic Labor*, an open access journal that challenges the corporatization of higher education with an emphasis on academic workers.

Graduate worker unions and class struggle

Introduction

The number of universities in the U.S. where graduate workers are organizing in labor unions is at an all-time high. Graduate unions at 38 universities across the country have negotiated and ratified contracts, and there are at least 31 additional universities where graduate workers are organizing but yet without a contract.¹ The motivation for graduate workers to organize within unions can be understood as a response to particular economic processes that have unfolded over the past several decades. A Marxist analysis illuminates mechanisms by which capitalist class interests exert pressure on higher-level administrators to facilitate the exploitation of workers on campus. This paper explores the specifics of this class-based employment relationship to clarify the interests of graduate workers in relation to those of their employers.

The encroachment of capitalist influences on higher education has been documented. In *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy*, Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades (2003) investigate higher education's shift "from a public good knowledge/learning regime to an academic capitalist knowledge/learning regime" (28) by increasingly engaging in a vast range of market activities, from intellectual property rights to athletics. In *How the University Works*, Mark Bousquet (2008) explores how corporate influences pressure administrators to undermine workers across the sector of higher education. These conversations can be enriched with a Marxist analysis that frames universities as sites of struggle between two distinct classes and explains the underlying economic relationships that are increasingly shaping higher education.

Graduate workers might not consider themselves working-class: they are skilled workers generally training for long-term careers or to become an expert in a field. They are thus in a

¹ These figures come from a survey of graduate websites and other online activity conducted by the author in summer 2018 and updated through November 2019. This list may not be complete.

“contradictory class location,” enjoying at least the future prospect of higher living and working standards (Wright 2015, 108-109). This contradiction stems from the fact that “class” has many dimensions. “Class” can be defined as a set of economic attributes shaping choices, or as a means of hoarding opportunities and excluding others; but only a Marxist definition explores the relationship between employers and employees – a relationship of domination and exploitation by one class over another (Wright 2015, Ch. 1). Using a Marxist definition, the two fundamental classes have objective and opposing interests: the working-class needs a living wage, benefits, and rights (among other things) for their own reproduction (Castree et al 2004, 32-33); and the capitalist-class must continually grow their investments, which according to Karl Marx (1990), they accomplish by exploiting workers – compensating them less than the value of their work, less than it takes for them to meet their reproductive needs. Under capitalism, workers cannot be compensated the full value of their work since it would inhibit capitalist profits; and capitalists can never exploit workers enough since their drive for growth is unlimited. Graduate assistants – teaching assistants, research assistants, administrative assistants, and other graduate students who work for universities, generally in exchange for a tuition waiver and a stipend – are considered working-class in a Marxist framework, since they sell labor to purchase reproductive needs like food and shelter. Higher-level administrators act as managers when they use their power as employers to prioritize capitalist class interests over the well-being of these graduate workers. This paper emphasizes this Marxist definition of class, not to deny salience in other definitions, but to understand the interest of graduate workers (and unions) in relation to their employers.

This paper discusses aspects of graduate workers’ class position at three different scales. In a labor context, “scale” can be understood as the level of negotiations, or the group of workers affected by actions and decisions (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2010, 219). At the smallest scale,

graduate workers face opposition to unions by university administrators, who manage graduate working conditions to keep their costs low. More generally, managements are shifting the composition of all academic teachers and researchers, replacing tenured positions with various types of contingent workers who have lower pay, fewer benefits, and less job security. All of this is driven by large-scale neo-liberal restructuring in higher education, which transforms universities so the workers serve capitalist profitmaking rather than a public good. The final section of this paper discusses business union strategies, which fail to approach employers as distinct and adversarial classes. This paper argues that a Marxist analysis illuminates the position of graduate workers in relation to the capitalist class interests they confront.

Graduate unionization: past and present

Unions enable graduate workers to organize toward changes in their workplaces through increased representation in decision-making processes. Without unions, managements (i.e. higher-level administrators) have control over the basic conditions of graduate workers' working lives, including the number and type of positions available as well as compensation. According to Marx (1990), working conditions and wages are driven by the material needs of the workers, who must be able to reproduce themselves indefinitely to continue working. Compensation must therefore cover the expenses of all goods and services that workers need to reproduce their physical and mental capacity to work. However, what is counted as "necessary" varies with workers' "habits and expectations" which depend on "historical and moral" conditions (275). If managements cede any control to unions, workers gain leverage to increase accepted standards for working and living conditions. This section illustrates how managements have fought graduate unions both in courts and on campuses to prevent such increases in labor costs.

The earliest campaigns to organize graduate workers at University of California-Berkley and University of Wisconsin-Madison centered issues of free speech and decision-making power (Rhoades & Rhoades 2002, 165-166). Ever since, there has been a legal battle as to whether graduate assistants should be considered workers with the right to unionize. For example, in 1970, Teaching Assistants Association (TAA) pressured University of Wisconsin-Madison management to voluntarily recognize their union, becoming the first ever graduate worker union to negotiate a contract. However, once management stopped recognizing TAA's fifth contract in 1980, graduate workers were forced to secure their legal right to a union in court, which they did in 1985 (TAA History). Graduate students at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, like all workers at public universities, are state employees and are therefore under the purview of the state labor board. Meanwhile, Graduate workers' rights at private universities, are governed by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), which in 1972 denied graduate assistants' status as workers by virtue of their identity as students. It wasn't until 2000 that graduate assistants at private universities were first recognized as employees with the legal right to unionize, leading to numerous campaigns including the Graduate Student Organizing Committee, which won the first contract for graduate workers at a private university, New York University, in 2002. But these campaigns eventually fizzled out after the NLRB reversed its ruling in 2004, revoking the employee status of graduate workers at private universities (Brown University v. NLRB 2004). In 2016, the NLRB again declared that graduate student workers are employees, precipitating a new wave of organizing on campuses. Most recently, in September 2019, the republican-controlled NLRB proposed a new permanent rule that prevents graduate workers at private universities from unionizing, though many are pushing back suggesting this constitutes

overreach (Flaherty 2019). Thus graduate workers continue to struggle for the basic right to organize in a union.

In the U.S., the basic right of workers to form a union in the private sector comes from the 1935 National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), which states that all employees have “the right to self organization, to form, join, or assist labor organizations, to bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing, and to engage in other concerted activities for the purpose of collective bargaining or other mutual aid protection” (NLRA Section 7). The act states “employees shall include any employee, and shall not be limited to the employee of a particular employer, unless [the act] explicitly stated otherwise,” (NLRA Section 2.3) with no apparent exception for the type of work graduate workers perform. University managements have nevertheless developed legal arguments against graduate unions. The most common legal opposition for discounting graduate work is the “primary purpose test,” which claims that graduates can only be students or workers, not both (Singh et al. 2006, 58). This legal argument echoes that of NCAA’s use of the term “student-athlete”, coined in the 1950s to avoid paying worker compensation for a football player who died on the field (Branch 2011). Using a similar logic, the 2004 NLRB decision argues that graduate workers “have a primarily educational, not economic, relationship with their university” (Brown University v. NLRB 2004, 487). The 1972 ruling similarly reasons that because their economic compensation pales in comparison to compensation for those who perform similar work (i.e. faculty), graduates must be *students* motivated by learning, not *workers* motivated by pay (Adelphi University v. NLRB 1972). Recognizing unions as obstacles to reducing labor costs, “administrations of private universities across the country swarmed in support of the effort to breathe life into this particular legal fiction,” to deny graduate workers’ rights (Bosquet 2008, 37). For example, in the early 2000s

Yale's management used "creative redefinitions of degree requirements" to argue that assistantship work is for graduate workers' learning purposes (Lafer 2003, 31-32). More recently NYU management attempted to undermine graduate workers' "employee" status by converting teaching assistantships to fellowships (Whitford 2014, 24-25). University managements have also found faculty willing to support the idea that graduates are not workers in hearings, with one testifying that graduate graders are "not a relief to me," and another who stated they "could just teach all the discussion groups myself" (quoted in Semuels 2017).

Much of the rhetoric that managements use to defend their legal position is misleading. For example, they deploy the language of apprenticeship to imply that any poor working conditions are justified by the promise of high-quality jobs in the future (Discenna 2010, 25-26). In fact, graduate workers do not automatically have secure jobs waiting for them as an apprentice would, as will be elaborated in the next section. Furthermore, contrary to the notion that graduate workers are teaching in order to learn, "the learning curve peaks years before the work ceases" (Nelson 1997, 25). Managements have also countered unions with the argument that, as the president of Penn State said, "[t]he University's relationship with our students is fundamentally different from that of an employer and employee" (quoted in Ralston 2017). Graduate workers' relationship with faculty is used to suggest that their employment depends upon professional, scholarly relationships – not economic ones. For example, Columbia Provost Coatsworth misleadingly stated "the relationship of graduate students *to the faculty that instruct them* must not be reduced to ordinary terms of employment" (quoted in Matthews 2018; emphasis added). This language uses faculty to obfuscate higher-administrator's role as managers. Yet, despite concerns that unions will harm advisor-advisee relationships, the vast majority of faculty at universities with graduate unions did not report any such negative experiences (Hewitt 2000). On

the contrary, unions may actually improve the relationship between graduate workers and faculty by clarifying expectations and responsibilities, implementing grievance procedures to address graduate workers' concerns, and improving training and course preparation (Julius and Gumport 2002, 201; Rogers et al. 2013). Unions only infringe upon professors' ability to abuse their power over students by instituting third-party grievance procedures. In short, managements are "hiding behind the worries about professor-student relationships" and "not being honest about where the most substantial changes will lie: between graduate students and their administrator-employers" (Gourevitch & Naidu 2016).

Much more representative of the actual experience of graduate workers is the "service test," (Singh et al. 2006, 59) which has become the legal norm in many states (and Canada). This defines employees as persons compensated for their service:

"Graduate assistants work as teachers or researchers. They perform their duties for, and under the control of the Employer's departments or programs. Graduate assistants are paid for their work and are carried on the Employer's payroll system. The graduate assistants' relationship with the Employer is thus indistinguishable from a traditional master-servant relationship (NLRB v. NYU, 2000; 2)."

From this perspective, the "primary purpose" arguments err "in seeing the academic world as somehow removed from the economic realm that labor law addresses – as if there was no room in the ivory tower for a sweatshop" (dissenting argument in *Brown v. NLRB*, 2004; 13). Most recently, the 2016 decision confirms that graduate workers' role as "students" does not diminish their roles as "employees", and that they can hold both identities at once (*Columbia v. NLRB* 2016). As the 1999 decision by California's labor board states, "it is abundantly clear that the teaching fellows are a major resource for the University in providing undergraduate

education” (quoted in Discenna 2010, 28). In fact, graduate workers are often the instructors who are working most closely with undergraduate students, developing the types of relationships with students that parents expect their children to develop with professors (Freeman 2000, 252). The importance of graduate workers’ role in undergraduate education is demonstrated by the power of withholding their labor during strikes which have played major roles in helping unions win union recognition, for example at New York University in 2014, and stronger contracts, as at University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign and The New School both did in 2018.

Not only are graduates workers, they are workers in need of protections. Some graduate organizers have aligned their struggle with the “fight for \$15”, pointing out that many graduate workers are not paid a living wage (Flaherty 2018b). Additionally, universities may skimp on benefits like health insurance. For example, beginning in fall 2018 at Syracuse University, management forced all graduate workers onto a “student” health insurance plan, whereas they previously had the option for an “employee” plan that many preferred. Other examples from my experience organizing graduate workers at Syracuse University demonstrate the need for graduate worker unions. Funding – including tuition waivers – is not always guaranteed, and some graduate workers are forced to find their own work and string together part-time assistantships, hourly positions, adjunct positions, or even take out loans to make ends meet as they finish their degrees. At Syracuse University, some workers’ job titles have been reclassified (e.g. from “teaching assistant” to “instructional assistant”) as a way to reduce pay and benefits for the same work. Graduate workers in some schools and departments experience late pay (a form of wage theft) or the lack of a formal written employment contract. There are workers who face various threats to their health or safety at work. As one example, graduate students are reportedly six times more likely than the general population to suffer from anxiety or depression,

stemming from social isolation, professional relationships, job prospects, and other sources (Flaherty 2018a). There are also many issues of equity and discrimination on campus. For example, graduate unions are centering the issue of sexual harassment (Bikales 2019) as well as protections for international graduate workers, who are especially vulnerable to workplace maltreatment because their student visas prohibit them working with any employers other than the university (Dai & Naidu 2018). Workers with grievances of any type and no union face the often opaque and bureaucratic processes of existing institutional channels. In addition to a tool to negotiate working conditions, unions provide legal assistance and formalized grievance procedures. They also increase institutional transparency by legally requiring management to provide requested information during bargaining as guaranteed in the NLRA (Pasek et al 2007). On the most basic level, graduate workers' may feel "lonely, voiceless, misrepresented" in their workplaces, and unions can help build collective identity as graduate workers find common interests and develop strategies for action (Newman 1997, 100).

Despite claiming in courts that graduate workers are not employees, back on campus managements have responded to unions like traditional employers. One graduate worker described their management's language as "condescending" and "infantilizing," portraying organizers as childish and irrational (Whitford 2014, 26). They might treat graduate workers as greedy by framing their funding as an "entitlement" to education which they should feel grateful for – rather than as compensation for work which they deserve (Newman 1997, 92).

Management may also portray graduate workers as deceitful but, in fact, management is often more deserving of such accusations. For example, during graduate workers' organizing campaign at Penn State, management portrayed a non-violent sit-in as a "radical" action preventing dialogue, mischaracterized graduate workers' existing compensation, misrepresented

the union voting process as undemocratic, and claimed negotiations would begin from a “clean slate” rather than from current employment conditions (Ralston 2017). Managements might also suggest that unions could diminish (rather than improve) overall compensation, whether by redistributing pay from higher-paid to lower-paid graduate workers or by collecting overly burdensome dues. While theoretically these are possibilities, it is unlikely that a majority of graduate workers would vote to ratify a contract that either redistributes salaries or doesn’t more than compensate them for the dues they would pay. Another suspect claim from university managements is that universities lack the financial ability to spend any more money on graduate workers. This argument was made in the 1990s by management at Yale, one of the wealthiest academic institutions in the U.S., which at the time claimed financial crisis, “by treating its reinvested profits as *expenses* – a practice that could land individual taxpayers in jail... to pretend it is broke when actually its financial health could hardly be better” (Nelson 1997, 26).

Some of managements’ attacks are subtle, likely part of efforts to refrain from explicitly anti-union public positions. Still in early stages of unionization, Syracuse University management avoids acknowledging the graduate union, presumably to reduce publicity and credibility. At some universities, managements have awarded modest pay raises in apparent attempts to placate graduate workers and quell their organizing, as the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill did after their grade strike in Fall 2018 (interview 4). Another strategy used by university managements is to curb organizing by channeling graduate workers through alternative decision-making processes, like student governments or advisory boards that lack structural power. For example, in 2016 UW-Madison management, which has not been obliged to recognize TAA’s 2009 contract since the state passed right-to-work legislation in 2011, began transitioning the contract into a “handbook” called “Graduate Assistants Policies and Procedures”. While TAA

won four graduate seats out of nine on the transition board amidst pressure from graduate organizers, management nevertheless refrained from good-faith negotiation and refused to budge on key issues (interview 3). Another element in many of these strategies are attempts to delay union processes indefinitely, knowing that graduate students cycle out every five or six years.

Other managements are bolder in their anti-union agenda. In the 1990s, Yale graduate workers were threatened with expulsion, termination, and poor recommendations (Lafer 2003, 34). Yale management also hired union-busting security guards from Cleveland to police protests and enforce an “atmosphere of intimidation and silence” (quoted in Nelson 1997, 25). More recently, Boston College took academic disciplinary action against graduate workers who participated in direct action, including probation against three graduate workers who allegedly interrupted a speech from the president, despite the fact that that one appears to have been falsely identified (Ronan 2018). Penn State management threatened international graduate workers in a statement that cited U.S. Immigration and Custom Enforcement policy days before graduate workers’ failed vote to certify a union there in 2018. They wrote “if the student has stopped taking courses or stopped performing research and that is what is required for their program, the student’s record should be terminated immediately and they will have to leave the U.S. as soon as possible” (quoted in Quilantan 2018). This statement was understood by many as an attempt to intimidate international students from supporting the union by threatening them with deportation in the hypothetical scenario of a future strike. During graduate workers’ vote for a union in 2016 at Harvard, the administration provided an incomplete list of voters to the union – which as the NLRB later ruled, prevented a fair election (Howard 2017).

Managements continue to fight graduate workers at many universities where they have succeeded in unionizing. For example, some managements have attempted to prevent the

purview of negotiations from extending beyond traditional union concerns. A lawyer representing Columbia, Yale, and Brown, suggested that if graduate workers can bargain over curriculum or research – even the number of hours they work – it could “create great disruption and havoc among universities and graduate students” (quoted in Semuels 2017). In the negotiations of their 2002 contract, NYU graduate workers were pressured into agreeing that “exclusively academic” issues were off the table (Lafer 2003, 33). University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign management held bargaining sessions during the 2016-2017 negotiations on a remote campus in a clear attempt to prevent graduate workers from attending (specifically at the “Fire Service Institute”, the director of which was the lead negotiator’s spouse). In addition to being far away, it was on an inconvenient and confusing bus route – a barrier both to transparent negotiations and pressuring management through rank-and-file attendance (interview 1).

Of course, higher-level administrators could renounce their managerialism and instead collaborate with workers to improve working experiences in mutually beneficial ways. In general, a union benefits the university as it “improves retention, makes recruiting easier, lowers turnover, and improves morale” (Gourevitch & Naidu 2016). Rather than hiring external legal services or appointing inexperienced administrators, management could contribute to more positive bargaining relationships, for example by “empowering the right committees, setting realistic objectives, and hiring technically proficient and knowledgeable negotiators” (Julius & Gumport 2002, 207). However, so long as higher-level administrators retain an allegiance to capitalist class interests, they will act as management in opposition to their workers.

Managements have weaponized the contradictory class position of graduate workers’ professional middle- and upper-class identities to deny them their role as workers in employment relationships. A Marxist analysis helps reveal why higher administrators are fighting graduate

unions despite both the empirical benefits of unions to the academic community and the fact that graduates are in workers that should have right to form a union. To the degree administrators act as managers for capitalist interests, they have one goal: “to receive as much labour as possible for as little money as possible” (Marx 1990, 682). Thus, while graduate workers are not working-class by every definition, their position as workers in a Marxist sense reveals important trends`.

The shift to contingent academic labor

In addition to opposing unions, university managements are also changing the composition of academic workers in a separate (but related) attempt to gain control over workers and reduce costs. This strategy operates at a larger scale, affecting all workers in the academic labor force – which here includes all types of teachers and researchers at universities. These jobs are undergoing a systematic shift from tenure-line faculty (full-time tenured and tenure-track) to what are often referred to as “contingent” workers, which include graduate workers as well as adjuncts, lecturers, post-doctoral workers, and other non-tenure track positions (both full- and part-time) – positions with lower pay (see Table 1), fewer benefits, and reduced job security (Berry et al. 2008). Since these jobs require fewer qualifications, doctorates unable to secure increasingly rare tenure-line positions must compete with a larger pool of applicants for these contingent positions. Thus, university managements both take advantage of and perpetuate a pool of workers that is cheaper and easier to control.

Position	Professor	Associate Professor	Assistant Professor	Instructor	Lecturer	Graduate Teaching Assistant
Average Salary	118,914	84,179	71,626	63,644	58,749	37,720

Table 1: Average salary by position in the academic labor force in 2017; Sources: Bureau of Labor Statistics for data on Graduate Teaching Assistants and National Center for Education Statistics for all other data.

This trend has been underway for at least several decades. In 1989, the influential “Bowen Report” responded to a diminishing academic job market by promising a boon in tenure-track faculty positions over the next 25 years, after normal market recovery (Bowen and Sosa 1989). But despite dominating the narrative on the issue through the 1990s, this analysis has not aged well. In reality, graduate workers are not simply facing a downturn in a bad job market; rather, the problem is the systematic shift over the last several decades away from tenure-track positions towards contingent labor, which was excluded from the report entirely (Bosquet 2008, 16-17).

Once university enrollments recovered after the financial downturn in the 1980s, the renewed demand for academics was filled almost exclusively by contingent positions (Gerber 2014, 119), contributing to a reduction in the overall proportion of tenure-track lines from 45% to 34% between 1975 and 1995 (American Association of University Professors 2017). By 2015, 70% of academic labor was contingent, up from 55% in 1975. But while the proportion of tenure-line positions has decreased by 15% in the past 40 years, the proportion of graduate workers has decreased from 21% to 14%. This indicates a higher proportion of graduate degree-holders to the high-paying jobs available for them. Those unable to secure increasingly rare tenure-line positions are forced to accept contingent positions or look for work elsewhere. These trends are continuing today, for example in the social sciences and humanities where “distance learning” (i.e. online education) is a “key emerging market” that “relies explicitly on an army of graduate and adjuncts” (Lafer 2003, 28) to replace the existing courses taught by tenure-line faculty. Researchers in STEM fields (Science, Technology, Engineering, & Math) are also feeling the effects of fewer tenure-line positions, where post-doctoral research positions are becoming the “*de facto* next career step” for many doctorates (National Postdoctoral Association 2009).

Herein lies the flaw in the argument that graduate workers must simply tolerate low wages and poor conditions with the expectation that desirable, high-paying jobs will be waiting for them once they finish their degrees. With fewer tenure-line academic jobs available, they are becoming more competitive. For many, contingent teaching positions are becoming the only option for work at universities. In STEM fields, increases in federal recruiting combined with a globalizing market are creating an “excess of scientific labor” to create competitive conditions for researchers as well (Camacho & Rhoads 2015, 301). In short, graduate workers work for universities until they earn their degrees, which qualify them for jobs that do not exist. As Mark Bosquet puts it, PhDs have become a *by-product* of an otherwise functional mechanism for reducing labor costs: doctorates “feel ‘treated like shit’ – without grasping the systemic reality that they *are* waste... the actual shit of the system... labor that must be disposed of for the system to work” (Bosquet 2008, 26). Universities welcome graduate workers while they are cheap workers, but turn their back on them once they earn their degrees and expect better treatment.

Undertaken separately by individual, opportunistic managements, this cost-saving mechanism of hiring cheaper workers has additional ramifications that collectively benefits all employers. Graduate coursework and assistantships still prepare graduates for jobs in academia as professors and researchers since “tenured professoriate seeks to reproduce itself in its own overspecialized image” (Ross 1997, 142). This, in a sense, “chains them to a particular branch of industry,” (Marx 1990, 795) by making it difficult to find a high quality job in another sector. Their situation becomes strikingly similar to Marx’s description of displaced industrial workers: “worth so little outside their old trade that they cannot find admission into any industries except a few inferior and therefore over-supplied and under-paid branches” (568). Graduates who remain

within academia but cannot secure a highly competitive tenure-line job, become part of what Marx calls a “surplus population” – “a relatively redundant working population, i.e. a population which is superfluous” to the needs of the employers (782).

A surplus population “produces new conditions for the domination of capital over labour” (Marx 1990, 486). With a large pool of people competing for relatively few teaching jobs, management has leverage to force workers to accept more work and lower wages. As fewer jobs are available, “the pressure of the unemployed compels those who are employed to furnish more labour” (Marx 1990, 793) – accepting increasingly higher volumes of work. The same pressure keeps salaries relatively low. Marx goes so far as to argue that, “the general movements of wages are exclusively regulated by... the varying proportions in which the working class is divided into an active army and a reserve army” (790). The reason is because with more backup workers available, employers have more power to exploit those who work.

A surplus population of contingent workers not only reduces the immediate costs of labor – by decreasing compensation for work – but also entrenches managements’ control over the academic labor force more generally. Without tenure, contingent workers have shorter-term contracts and diminished job security. Often financially vulnerable, contingent workers are more willing to accept work on short-notice or at inconvenient times to meet the employer’s needs. Contingent workers also face less representation on campus. When U.S. universities established ideals of “shared governance” in the 1950s and 1960s, tenure-line faculty gained: control over traditional departmental concerns (curriculum development, appointing and promoting colleagues and chairs); faculty senates and various forms of oversight committees; and some faculty unionized, though private sector faculty lost their rights as workers in 1980 after the NLRB classified them as managers (Gerber 2014, Ch. 4). By shifting to contingent labor,

university managements have dissociated the various aspects of academic labor, separating teaching from research and diminishing faculty administrative and governance responsibilities altogether (Gerber 2014). Contingent workers have fewer and less powerful structures of representation, often not fully included in faculty senates or departmental decision-making. Additionally, contingent workers are spatially, temporally, and contractually fragmented – in separate schools, departments, offices, classrooms, and labs, with shifting schedules and varying contracts – which prevents them from coming together. Like workers in nineteenth-century domestic industries: “the workers’ power of resistance declines with their dispersal” (Marx 1990, 591). Contingent workers’ lack of job security also exposes them to the danger of retribution, meaning they must “remain politically silent and publicly inactive so as not to jeopardize their prospects for tenure in the future” (Aronowitz 2014, 65). To put it crudely, the population of contingent teachers is to management becoming “a mass of human material always ready for exploitation” (Marx 1990, 784).

Again, administrators could renounce their capitalist class allegiance and instead promote the interests of workers. They could focus on *costs* of contingent labor “to students, higher education, and the local economy,” instead of the *cost-savings* to management (Schell 2001, 46). Rather than recruiting high-quality professors, this system “sorts for persons who are in a financial position to accept compensation below the living wage” (Bosquet, 2008; 3). Additionally, American Association of University Professors “Policy Documents and Reports” notes that, “[i]t is difficult to develop a coherent curriculum and maintain continuity between and among courses when major academic responsibilities are divided among ‘transient’ and regular faculty” (2015, 193). Instead, contingent academic workers have become a “permanent underclass” who the university is “structurally dependent” upon as teachers and researchers

(Nelson 1997, 4-5). Management may not be intentional or even aware of their antagonistic class behavior towards workers. But without the structural representation on behalf of workers that unions provide, managements are unlikely to significantly improve working conditions, for as is shown in the next section, “[t]oo many other powerful constituencies have claim on the same dollars” (Nelson 1997, 8).

Higher education as a private good

The cutting of labor costs at universities – as demonstrated in the above trends – can be considered part of the larger-scale phenomenon called “neo-liberalism”. Neo-liberalism is often thought of as an ideology (where the private market is preferred to the public state), but through a class lens, neo-liberalism is better understood as a “political project” of the capitalist class – a project beginning in the 1970s which aims “to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites” (Harvey 2005, 19). Neo-liberalism has included an attack on the boundary that maintains higher education as a public, state-funded institution, transforming it into a site for private, profit-making interests – a process that requires exploiting workers according to Marx.

The decades prior to neo-liberalism have been described as a period of “state-managed capitalism” which peaked in the 1950s and 1960s (Fraser 2017, 29-32). As the “most powerful regulator of economic activity in capitalist societies,” the state influences the number and types of firms in the economy, provides public goods and services to its people, and provides jobs as a major employer (Castree et al. 2004, 14-15). In the era of state-managed capitalism, the state invested taxes, which are siphoned largely from capitalist profits, into public services (Fraser 2017); for higher education this includes things like federal financial aid, subsidies, grants, loans,

and tax breaks. Higher education thus became a state-funded public good. In the process, the sector came to employ a variety of workers subsidized by the state. Faculty teach, conduct research, and advise; lower-level administrators and campus workers maintain day-to-day functions; other campus service workers fulfill the basic social needs of students like preparing food and cleaning. These workers all collectively produce education, broadly defined to include the entire experience of being a student.

If the ultimate goal is for students to learn, the product of the work (i.e. education) is primarily a “use-value” where the work is valued for its *quality*. In this case, the “exchange-value” – the numeric *quantity* on the market i.e. the wage – is of secondary importance to the actual learning experience of the student. In this ideal of public higher education, the state invests in the workers for their "useful labor" where "[c]onsumption, the satisfaction of needs, in short use-value, is therefore its final goal" (Marx 1990, 250). As a public good, universities value workers for their contributions to the intellectual development of students. Of course, this is an oversimplification and during state-managed capitalism university workers also served other interests, such as the military (and the military-industrial economy). Nevertheless, education can still be understood as a use-value to the degree that economic calculations were marginal to the decision-making process and the imperative was to educate, not reduce the costs of labor.

As neo-liberalism takes hold in the 1970s and 1980s, the capitalist-class approaches higher education in a two-pronged strategy: retrenchment and restructuring. Because the capitalist class owns the greatest share of wealth, they pay a disproportionate share of taxes; therefore, they benefit from retrenchment, or cutting state expenditures for higher education. Capital has a natural hostility toward education since it tends to not be profitable: “Time for education, for intellectual development... what foolishness!" (Marx 1990, 375). Neo-liberal politicians therefore

used economic strains through the 1970s and 1980s to justify state retrenchment from higher education, especially liberal education, which has undergone a “crisis of confidence” in the public eye (Gerber 2014, 121). Higher education is instead framed as “intellectual luxuries that perhaps we could do without” (Ronald Reagan in 1967 as California governor, quoted in Berrett 2015).

In tandem with state retrenchment, restructuring within universities has shifted many academic activities to actively serve capitalist class interests, which are driven solely by profits. While there are some explicitly for-profit universities (e.g. University of Phoenix), other universities have restructured to serve capitalist interests while remaining classified as non-profit institutions. With the decline of state funding, public and private non-profit institutions of higher education have made up the difference not only with increases in tuition, but also with corporate funding sources through grants, donations, endowments and corporate partnerships (Slaughter & Rhoades 2005). These investments of corporate money in higher education presume an expectation of a return, or a profit for corporations. For example, Koch brothers’ investments in several universities gave them influence over decisions such as faculty hires (Center For Public Integrity 2018). According to Marx, profits are derived from exploitation of labor quantified in “surplus value”, or the difference between the cost of workers and the value of their work – “between the price of labour-power and the value which its function creates” (Marx 1990, 682). A Marxist framework thus suggests that capitalists have found ways to invest in universities such that the workers earn them a return. Without even meeting these workers, capitalists manage to exploit them by appropriating the surplus value of their work.

In order to harness surplus value, work requires an authority "directing, superintending and adjusting" the collective labor process (Marx 1990, 447-8). Higher-level administrators have

grown and centralized this role, overseeing all other campus workers toward the creation of surplus value for various capitalist interests, hence becoming *management*. Administrative positions more than doubled from 1987 to 2012, which is twice the rate of growth for students in the same period (New England Center for Economic Reporting 2014). A university's administration is now a wide network of departments on campus that fit within a hierarchical, corporate-like structure – including deans with the power to re-map departments and disciplines, budgeting directors who manage the institutions finances, and chancellors and provosts who act and are compensated like CEOs (Ross 1997, 139). Administrative positions – which were once faculty serving short-term appointments, who “never forgot that the purpose of the university was the promotion of education and research” – have become non-academic managerial careers which are seen “as an end in and of itself” (Ginsberg 2011, 2).

Without institutional loyalty or academic identity, managerial administrators have developed priorities independent of traditional academic principles, instead aligning with corporate partners. Embedded in networks that cross boundaries between corporations, the state, and academic intuitions, administrators have enabled corporate money to flow in higher education by integrating colleges and universities with the “new economy”, where knowledge is used as a “raw material to be converted into products, processes, and services” (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004, 15). Administrators have adopted language and practices of corporate managements to increase “efficiency” through “strategic planning” of university finances (Gerber 2014, 122). For example, in 2013 Syracuse University management contracted Bain & Company – a private management consulting firm – to conduct a full assessment of the university's financial practices and produce a report, which recommended a wide range of corporate policies, plans, and priorities including suggestions for how to reduce labor costs (Burke 2018). In short,

administrators have consolidated power on campus, adjusted the aims of higher education toward profitmaking, and become managers toward workers in pursuit of those aims.

Several examples demonstrate mechanisms through which the capitalist class invests in and profits from academic research. Since 1980, when the Bayh-Dole Act passed (after lobbying from universities), government-funded research has been subject to patents and intellectual property rights. For one, this means that patent officials “judge knowledge on its commercial potential,” as opposed to its intellectual academic value (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). This legislation has also enabled universities to partner with the private sector through what can be described as “in-house venture capital offices,” offering cheap and skilled researchers to undertake commercial projects that establish and protect intellectual property for for-profit companies (Lafer 2003, 27). Alternatively, corporate interests can influence the content of research results that benefits the legitimacy or desirability of their product. For example, at the National Institute of Medicine forum in 2011, nine of the nineteen university “experts” on a panel exaggerated the need for opioids while diminishing the potential harm (Fauber 2014). Corporate investments are not always so obvious, also operating in “a sophisticated web of influence” that more subtly affects “what questions are even asked” (Basken 2018). Another capitalist actor that benefits from all manner of research are corporate publishers, who don’t compensate either researchers or reviewers, but then sell that work back to universities for profit vis-à-vis institutional licenses (Bratterbury 2017).

In addition to research, teaching labor can also be productive for capitalist interests. Education is necessary from the perspective of a capitalist, since many types of workers need knowledges and skills (what Marx calls “mental capabilities”; 270) to perform their work. To meet these needs, higher education has increasingly become a form of training for future

employment. For example, there is an increased emphasis on professional schools for business, law, medicine, and others, which “are already to corporate capital what West Point is to the US Army” (Smith 2000, 334). As the capitalist-class gains control over education, universities can shoulder training costs that companies would otherwise have to pay for themselves. Education can also facilitate an ideological agenda, for example when the Koch brothers support the development of curriculum or programs that instill conservative ideals into students (Gerber 2014, 145).

As the corporate mentality pervades the higher education sector, student-learning outcomes become secondary to economic considerations. Rather than valuing the *quality* of the work, management understands it as a *quantity* – an expenditure expected to produce a return. This creates incentive not only to increase the profitability of work, but also to reduce costs, as demonstrated in the first two sections. Universities follow the industry “handbook”: oppose unions, reduce pay and benefits, subcontract workers to disguise responsibility, establish multiple tiers for compensation, cooperate with other employers to keep industry standards low, minimize workers’ knowledge of one another’s conditions, and promote an ideology of individual merit and competition over collective well-being (Nelson 1997, 4).

But while managements reduce the cost of their workers, they also invest in visual expressions of wealth and prodigality on campus, using discretionary spending to allocate money based on “compelling gratification” (Bosquet 2008). For example, universities spend lavishly on campus “stars” such as big-name faculty members and athletic coaches; in fact, the highest paid state employees in 39 states are football or basketball coaches (Evilla and Gibson 2018). Universities are also spending increasing amounts of money on campus facilities and appearances in what Bosquet terms an “arms race” of campus beautification (2008, 7). Syracuse

University, for example, recently installed a controversial \$6 million walkway. It may appear contradictory that universities are so willing to spend on such trivial expenditures as they continue to compensate their workers so little. Nevertheless, one of the outcomes of continued growth for its own sake is that "[l]uxury enters into capital's expenses of representation" (Marx 1990, 741). This juxtaposition between an abundance of wealth and impoverishment of workers at universities supports one of Marx's central theses that as capitalist growth accumulates, "the situation of the worker, be his payment high or low, must grow worse" (1990, 799).

The failures of business unionism in class struggle

From a Marxist perspective, labor unions can be a working-class tool of class struggle against capitalists. However, in many ways they have lost this class-based character. This section discusses cases where unions fail to act as adversarial class-based organizations in relation to the neo-liberal attack on workers from the capitalist class. Instead, they use "business union" strategies, which focus on convincing employers to make concessions through negotiations with limited worker mobilization. This strategy prevents workers from using unions to engage in class struggle. Examples from the experiences of several graduate unions affiliated with United Auto Workers (UAW) demonstrate practices of business unionism and the absence of a class orientation. These include University of California's UC Student-Workers Union's (or UAW 2865) organizing drive in the 1990s/early 2000s and their 2017-2018 contract campaign, as well as recent experiences of Graduate Workers Columbia (GWC) and Graduate Student Organizing Committee (GSOC at New York University), which are both affiliated with UAW 2110. These examples demonstrate the limitations of business unions in confronting capitalist class interests.

Many forces have come to diminish unions' ability to serve as countervailing forces to capitalist class interests. In addition to confronting unions outright, capitalists have worked to prevent unions from responding to corporate aggression with militancy – “taming unions by pushing for labor laws and regulations that encouraged or forced the replacement of workers and worker agency with a huge union bureaucracy” (McAlevey 2016, 40). But US labor leaders have also been complicit in dulling unions as tools for working-class struggle. During the McCarthy era of the 1940s and 1950s, union leadership purged many socialist and radical organizers (Aronowitz 2014, 61-62). Largely under liberal white male leadership, they subsequently failed to organize alongside the women's, civil rights, anti-war and environmental movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s (Turner & Hurd, 2001, 15-17). In the 90s, some unions attempted to realign with marginalized and precarious workers long ignored by traditional industrial unions in service sectors such as communication, healthcare, and education. However, rather than empowering and uniting these workers as a class, this became “a scramble for new members” that caused territorial infighting between unions (Early 2012).

From a Marxist perspective, unions' flaw is their failure to treat employers and capitalists as a distinct class of adversaries. This flaw is embedded in “business unions”, the roots of which are associated with the founders of the American Federation of Labor who believed that workers and management could collaborate toward mutual interests through unions with corporate-like structures (Jozwiak 2004). This became the dominant model for the large U.S. industrial labor unions of the 20th century. Jane McAlevey criticizes these unions for relying on “shallow” strategies like “advocacy” (i.e. persuasion) and “mobilizing” (i.e. public pressure) toward incremental concessions, as opposed to “deep organizing” that empowers rank-and-file workers to build mass people power toward more significant victories (2016, 11). Business unions remain

“uncritical” of existing social, political, and economic structures, aiming to modify (rather than fundamentally change) workers’ structural conditions (Robinson 2000). Rather than recruiting, involving, and empowering workers, business unions seek to influence employers and corporate actors, treating members more like customers than decision-makers and spending resources primarily on professional staff and services. Unions have thus largely abandoned the powerful tactic of the strike, which requires significant worker involvement. Many contracts now include “no-strike” clauses, which prohibit workers from striking by law for a set period of time.

Without the leverage of strikes, collective bargaining has become “more a blunt instrument of management than a workers’ sword” (Aronowitz 2014, 78). Additionally, business unions are “exclusive” toward workers in other unions, non-unionized workers, and the unemployed, focusing narrowly on the workers within the bargaining unit (Robinson, 2000). This creates artificial boundaries between workers and puts unions in a poor position to unite workers in different forms of employment relationships. By pursuing business unionism, labor organizers renounce working-class struggle, essentially allowing the capitalist-class to undermine workers unopposed. The dominance of this strategy has spelled union decline since at least the early 1970s: declines in membership, concession bargaining, less-engaged rank-and-file, low capacity for reaching new constituencies, and less institutionalized collective action – all contributing to an absence of any clear and consistent victories for labor (Murray 2017, 10).

Examples from graduate unions demonstrate strategies of business unionism. In the late 1990s UAW staff promoted business union-style strategies in their campaign to organize graduate workers at seven universities across the University of California state system (Living History Project 2014; Sullivan 2003). During this campaign, UAW staff organizers emphasized the importance of centralized contract negotiations. By contrast, campus graduate organizers at

UC-Santa Barbara (UCSB), convinced people to join with promises of greater direct autonomy over their academic workplaces. As the campaign progressed, UCSB graduate organizers became disillusioned with staff's insistence that they adhere to UAW's centralized organizing plan. When UCSB graduate organizers defied UAW staff to pursue what they believed were more democratic organizing activities, UAW replaced the staff organizer on UCSB's campus, confiscated their documents, imposed harsher rules, admonished graduate organizers in front of their peers at other universities, and accused them of "counter-organizing" against the interests of the union (Sullivan 2003). The conflict escalated during contract negotiations when the eight UCSB bargaining representatives resigned in protest after UAW accepted a no-strike clause on their behalf. Notably, some graduate workers at UCSB were frustrated with the elected representatives for resigning via e-mail without consultation of their constituents, and for naively believing that "a single campus-based organization, separate from the system-wide structure that had been set up, could guarantee 'union democracy'" (Zwerling 2001). Nevertheless, many graduate workers at UCSB felt disenfranchised in the process, as evidenced by the fact that they barely reached the 2/3 majority necessary to ratify the 2002 contract (283 yes votes, as compared to over 500 votes in support of a 1998 strike). Some considered it a "pyrrhic victory" which sacrificed discussions of more transformative values and methods for a contract, and ultimately "traded one paternalism for another" (Sullivan 2003, 109-110).

About two decades later, there was again controversy over business union strategies within UC Student-Workers Union leading to a regressive contract. In the lead up to the campaign, the union aligned with interests of the UAW bureaucracy as the leadership emphasized the role of professional staff and increased centralization by empowering the executive board and reducing campus unions' autonomy over their budgets and membership communications (interview 5).

The vote to ratify a new contract took place during the summer (when many graduate workers are away from campus) only three days after members were given notice; furthermore, the campaign and ballot were biased toward a yes-vote (Phillips & Ikebe 2018). The union thus diminished the involvement of its membership in favor of more careful, centralized negotiations, resulting in a contract with stagnant wages, major concessions on key demands including affordable housing and international student fees, and few gains.

In New York City, UAW-2110, which represents graduate workers at New York University and Columbia, provides several additional, examples of business union strategies. In summer 2018, UAW negotiated a “bargaining framework agreement” with Columbia management that included a no-strike pledge effective until April 2020. To make matters worse, UAW staff negotiated this agreement on Graduate Workers Columbia’s behalf without the knowledge or involvement of any graduate members, only bringing it to the membership for a vote of approval *after* the agreement was reached with management. This undercut the authority of graduate workers, specifically the bargaining committee who should be fully involved in all negotiations. GSOC faced a similar situation with UAW-2110 in 2013, when they negotiated an agreement with NYU management that excluded research assistants from the unit, with neither consultation nor a vote. During the lead up to GWC’s vote on whether to accept the agreement, graduate workers at GSOC worried that the outcome could set a precedent for the future. In a public endorsement for a “no” vote on the agreement, GSOC graduate organizers suggested that “without the power of a strike, GWC will have significantly less leverage to bargain a strong contract,” and that graduate workers deserve more than to provide “a rubber stamp of approval, but a chance for substantive deliberation and debate among the membership” (GSOC Website). Jane McAlevey suggests that three questions can determine if the union is a vehicle for workers

or a third party during bargaining: “Does the process involve every worker? Are negotiations fully transparent? Can any worker attend?” (2016, 57). UAW-2110 failed graduate workers in these instances and became a third party.

Another tactic used by UAW-2110 reduces the power of their rank-and-file members within the union by pinning membership eligibility in GSOC to a narrowly-defined working status, thereby reducing membership numbers. While this seems counter-intuitive it was understood by some graduate workers as a targeted attempt to disqualify a portion of more radical graduate workers (for example those who had supported the union’s involvement in the movement to Boycott, Divest and Sanction Israel for their Occupation of Palestine) from membership as well as steward positions (interview 2). In addition, reducing the number of members also limits seats allocated to GSOC on UAW-2110’s joint council, preventing a takeover by graduate workers. But the effect of such activities is to disempower rank-and-file organizers and prevent the development of a more engaged working-class movement.

In a Marxist analysis, graduate workers’ struggles with managements and business unionism cuts along lines determined by class. When graduate unions organize to improve the working conditions of graduate workers, they are pitted against capitalist interests at universities. If a union fails to recognize administrators as managers with an allegiance to capitalist class interests, they are likely to be less effective as tools for working-class struggle.

Conclusion

Depending on the definition, graduate workers may not be considered part of the working-class. Nevertheless, a Marxist class analysis reveals important market logics affecting their employment. Higher-level administrators act as management to reduce labor costs at universities

by undermining workers' ability to organize in labor unions, as well as by shifting the academic labor force from tenure-line faculty to contingent workers. The underlying pressure to reduce labor costs in these ways comes from the larger-scale shift from state to corporate funding in higher education. Managements serve capitalist investments at universities by ensuring the work at universities provides a return – whether through intellectual property rights, corporate publishing, corporate-friendly research, shouldering training costs, or other means. In this framework, therefore, the decisions that reduce the cost of workers while increasing their profitability, have shared roots in a capitalist-class offensive against the working-class.

It might be counter-intuitive to think of institutions of higher education as sites of capitalist exploitation, considering that the majority of them are non-profit institutions. However, Marx explicitly addresses education, suggesting that so long as there is profit-motive, a class relation persists; the fact that the site of analysis is a "teaching factory, instead of a sausage factory, makes no difference to the relation" (1990, 644). So long as managements retain their alliance to the capitalist-class, their interests are structurally aligned against the workers. Strategies of business unionism that fail to draw distinctions between the two classes are therefore unable to significantly advance working-class interests.

Beyond business unions, there are several directions for graduate workers and other university workers organizing to improve their working conditions. Graduate workers and other contingent workers can use unions to improve their working conditions at relatively small scales by increasing the accepted standards of living. Academic workers could also collaborate to scale-up the struggle and pressure universities to invest more in higher quality tenure-line positions. At an even larger scale, universities can be reclaimed from capitalist interests as publicly funded institutions, replacing profit-making motives with investments in the public good. But whatever

the scale, a Marxist perspective reveals that the interests of graduate workers are threatened by capitalist class interests. Whether or not unions will rise to defend graduate workers remains to be seen.

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Graduate union strategies: renewing multi-scalar organizations and capacities

Introduction

In 2018, 11.7% of all workers in the US were represented by a labor union – the lowest level since comparable data first became available in 1983 when the figure was 23.3% (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2019a). This trend highlights unions’ current weakness amidst decades of decline. Nevertheless, there are signs of resurgence for US unions in some sectors. In 2018, 485,000 workers – over 90% in education and healthcare sectors – participated in major work stoppages, the most since 1986 (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2019b). This paper focuses on a presently active sub-category of education workers: graduate workers, including research, teaching, and administrative assistants at universities. Graduate workers first organized unions in the late 1960s in the context of anti-war and free speech movements at universities including University of California and University of Wisconsin. There was another wave of graduate union campaigns in the 1990s and early 2000s, invigorated in 2000 when the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) first recognized the right for graduate workers at private universities to unionize, though it was overturned in 2004. A 2016 NLRB decision that again made graduate unions legal has contributed significantly to the ongoing third wave of graduate organizing. By my count there are now 38 unions with a contract and an additional 31 organizing yet without a contract.² This paper investigates the organizing strategies used by contemporary graduate worker unions to understand whether and how they are renewing the power of unions in this broadly negative context for US labor.¹

In part because of the decline of organized labor, some unions are developing new strategies in efforts to “renew” worker power (Murray 2017). Fairbrother (2015) conceptualizes union

² These figures come from a survey of graduate websites and other online activity conducted by the author in summer 2018 and updated through November 2019. This list may not be complete.

“renewal” as the transformation of three interrelated elements of unions: 1) “organizations”, which encompass relationships between members and leaders including representation and governance; 2) “capacities”, or the ability to build solidarity, articulate concerns, and mobilize resources to collectively affect change; and 3) “purpose”, or overarching aims and key values.

Using this framework, unions can pursue “renewal” of various union elements: 1)

“organizations”, by shifting power from centralized hierarchical leadership to democratically accountable membership and coalitions; 2) “capacities”, by de-emphasizing bureaucratic contract negotiations, individualized grievance procedures, business-like member services, and electoral politics advocacy, in favor of more diverse capacities that center rank-and-file engagement, participation, and solidarity in movement-style coalition building; and 3) “purposes”, by replacing shortsighted and incremental goals with more broadly transformative ones (Fairbrother 2015; Ross 2007). While these trends of renewal are complementary, they can develop in uneven or contradictory ways (Ross 2007). This paper investigates whether and how contemporary graduate union “organizations” and “capacities” align with core commitments of union renewal. I don’t investigate “purpose” because it is relatively more subjective, and I feared interview responses would vary significantly based on personal opinions.

Operating at multiple scales can enrich the process of union renewal (Tufts 2007). At the scale of the bargaining unit, unions become more powerful by building strong networks that enable democratic and strategic use of collective power (McAlevey 2016). The first two sections of this paper discuss organizations and capacities at this first scale: graduate workers’ *organizations*, which encompass building membership, governance structures, and accountability; and graduate workers’ *capacities* to shape their working conditions through bargaining and direct action strengthened by transparent communication and solidarity. At larger

scales, some unions are cultivating collaborations with other workers and communities to form strategic partnerships and broaden union agendas. This strategy of “community unionism” uses less hierarchical forms of organizing to: establish allies among a variety of groups and movements, develop complementary capacities, reach marginalized people and those in non-traditional workplaces, and build new scales of organizing toward broader economic justice (Wills 2001, 466). The subsequent two sections of this paper discuss union organizations and capacities at these larger scales: graduate workers’ *organizational* partnerships with communities beyond their ranks on and off campus; and graduate workers’ *capacities* to support broader campaigns. The final section briefly summarizes contemporary graduate unions’ applications of multi-scalar strategies to assess whether and how they constitute union renewal.

This research is not a neutral or disinterested assessment of graduate unions. It is motivated by my personal experience organizing graduate workers at Syracuse University, and it based on the experiences of organizers who are politically committed to strengthening graduate unions. My primary aim with this paper is to document a variety of perspectives and repertoires from the pool of active graduate organizers to enrich a discussion of strategies that renew the power of unions. Thus, this research highlights the experiences and insights of graduate organizers at unions across the US, primarily through interviews with twelve key informants from eight unions, ranging from 1-2 hours. In contrast with labor’s more traditional “staff-only corporate-focused research” (McAlevey 2016, 207) this research centers the perspectives of rank-and-file graduate organizers. In an effort to highlight organizing strategies that represent a variety of contexts, I selected interview participants from unions with signs of activity or success (strikes or strong contracts) and diverse types of unions (different parent unions, inclusion of various non-graduate workers, public/private universities, and established/new unions). Table 1 summarizes

some key attributes of the unions represented by interviewees for this research. Admittedly, I prioritized unions where I had contacts, and those in more convenient locations, where I was able to meet organizers in-person. Constraints on time and failures of communication and coordination limited both the scope and rigor of data collection. For example, my goal to verify responses by interviewing at least *two* active organizers from each union was not fully achieved. Furthermore, many other graduate unions could no doubt have provided additional, rich perspectives. Nevertheless, these unions provide a diverse sample of characteristics that cover the major differences in types of unions, enabling identification of common themes and key differences in a cross-section of relatively successful unions.

Union Name (Shorthand)	Key Informant Code*	University	Parent Union	Wave	Type of University
Syracuse Graduate Employees United (SGEU)	Researcher	Syracuse University	Service Employees International United	3	Private
Graduate Student Organizing Committee (GSOC)	4 & 12	New York University	United Auto Workers	2	Private
Graduate Workers Columbia (GWC)	2 & 3	Columbia University	United Auto Workers	3	Private
Student Employees at the New School (SENS)	5	The New School	United Auto Workers	3	Private
UC Student Workers' Union	9	University of California System	United Auto Workers	2	Public
Graduate Employees' Union (GEO-UIUC)	1	University of Illinois-Urbana-Champaign	American Federation of Teachers	2	Public
Graduate Employees' Union (GEO-UM)	8 & 10	University of Michigan	American Federation of Teachers	1	Public
Teaching Assistants Association (TAA)	6	University of Wisconsin-Madison	American Federation of Teachers	1	Public
Workers Union at UNC (Workers Union)	7 & 11	University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill	United Electrics	3	Public

Table 1: Interviews with key informants (rank-and-file organizers).

*An interviewer code is used in place of the interviewees' names to protect privacy. See works cited for details.

Graduate workers' organizations at the workplace scale

Collectively, graduate workers on a given campus face barriers to solidarity in the form of temporal divisions (varying, unpredictable schedules and high turnover); spatial divisions (scattered in shifting, often isolated locations); and contractual divisions (different worker

classifications, pay, hours, and benefits). But while unions face constraints, they maintain the power to orient their organizations toward renewed democratic power (Holgate 2018, 1-2). Debates on union renewal have argued for accountable and participatory empowerment of workers through mass participation in autonomous, democratic, rank-and-file organizations (McAlevey 2016). This section investigates how graduate workers construct union organizations through membership-building with one-on-one conversations, membership drives, and leadership development; accountability structures including face-to-face contact, accessibility, and formalized governance documents; and forms of governance such as stewards, executive boards, bargaining teams, committees, working groups, caucuses, and paid staff.

According to interviewees for this research project, graduate union membership is expanded primarily through conversations between workers. New campaigns begin with a base of support in a few departments and schools (usually in the humanities and social sciences) before working to close gaps in membership (usually in science, technology, engineering, math and others). Legally recognized unions benefit from lists of workers and their email addresses, which university administration is required to provide. GSOC (Graduate Student Organizing Committee at New York University) has a contract provision ensuring each new union employee receives a welcome letter with the union's website, their stewards' names, a list of rights and benefits, and a membership card to sign, in addition to a proper appointment letter for their job (interview 12). Nevertheless, nothing replaces one-on-one conversations between organizers and graduate workers (interview 10). Especially in new campaigns, this involves visiting graduate workers at their workplaces (offices, labs, or classrooms). For visits like these, organizers can form pairs (or "buddies") to hold one another accountable, which GEO-UM (Graduate Employee's Union at University of Michigan) calls "accountabilibuddies" (interview 8).

Once established, unions might emphasize early fall membership drives and a big first membership meeting – a strategy which could mitigate challenges in motivating rank-and-file graduate workers later in the semester (interview 12). A working-group at TAA (Teaching Assistants Association at University of Wisconsin-Madison) forms each spring to schedule orientation events for the following fall term with as many programs as possible, ranging from big presentations to informal discussions (interview 6). GEO-UM and GSOC’s contracts guarantee a presentation and a spot for tabling, respectively, at new teaching assistant training events (interview 8 & 12).

Educational and social events are another opportunity to recruit members. Graduates might learn about unions at informational tabling, picketing, teach-ins, or public performances. Social events also facilitate two-way communication and produce “socially fluent” organizers and members (interview 8). One popular event specific to graduate unions is a “work-in” or “grade-in” where members bring work, hold classes or office hours, make signs, and feed/cafeinate students and workers. Union members can also expand their network of graduates by participating in other organizations’ events.

Another strategy to build union membership and leadership is to identify and invest in “organic leaders” (McAlevey 2016, 12) who are already trusted in their academic departments or networks. In order to empower graduate workers to have conversations with potential members, unions can host organizer trainings (interview 12). Notably, workers may be turned off by “aggressive tactics” like GESO’s (Yale’s graduate union campaign in the 1990s) former practices of interrupting labs and visiting graduates at their homes to sign them up (Singh et al. 2006, 66). Instead, organizers today seem to prefer that graduates in each department sign up their immediate co-workers where they naturally congregate (interview 10). Ultimately,

cultivating engaged rank-and-file membership comes down to the time consuming and sometimes banal, day-to-day organizing through one-on-one conversations.

According to interviewees, face-to-face interaction with graduate workers is an important way in which organizers are held accountable. For example, this is how GWC (Graduate Workers Columbia) uncovered a tax software problem affecting international students, which they then pressured Columbia University to resolve with a petition (interview 3). Unions may also encourage particularly active academic departments to organize regular meetings to keep track of their specific concerns (interview 8). Some unions take advantage of existing academic structures to reach graduate workers such as elected departmental graduate “liaisons” to faculty (interview 6). Alternatively, Yale is experimenting with departmental “micro-units” to accommodate the needs of various departments, which means, “a department that wants a union can have one, and those that don’t, don’t [have to create one]” (quoted in Schuhrke & Tefft 2016).

Interviewees discussed accessibility of meetings as another aspect of accountability. Not every union is as lucky as GEO-UIUC (Graduate Employees’ Organization at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign) to have their parent union office adjacent to the university (interview 1). For example, Workers Union at UNC (University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill) meets at a public library to accommodate those who prefer to meet off campus, though it’s not a central location and it’s only available in the evenings (interview 7). GEO-UM has worked to overcome a “palpable remove” between main and north campus by rotating meeting locations and using audio-visual technology that allows members to attend meetings remotely (interview 8). Unions might also take measures to improve accessibility among members with disabilities like ensuring wheelchair accessibility and printing or projecting documents at meetings for those

with visual or hearing impairments. One interviewee suggested that unions can also feel inaccessible when meetings are “procedural”, “insular”, and “top-down”, and that unions may need to work to be more inviting to newcomers and create a “lower threshold for engagement” (interview 6).

In order to transparently formalize union processes and accountability mechanisms, many established unions have governing documents (constitutions, bylaws, etc.). These may be followed only implicitly and some practices may not be entirely formalized (interview 1 & 6). According to interviewees, some unions only reference these documents when there’s disagreement or ambiguity, and during voting. GEO-UM is particularly proactive in that they revisit governing documents at their summer retreat and re-approve the constitution yearly at the first general membership meeting (interview 8). However, especially for relatively new campaigns, “robust governance structures” like a constitution might “over-proceduralize” and distract from an emphasis on organizing (interview 3). Piecemeal guidelines (on meeting facilitation, voting procedures, listserv use, etc.), may just as effectively resolve disputes on an as needed basis. For example, after several organizers were denied access to the membership listserv to send out a petition, GWC formalized a rule that only petitions signed by 10 percent of the membership would be distributed on the membership listserv (interview 2 & 3). GEO-UM, which has a constitution, also maintains separate policy documents on things like investments, staff evaluations, and endorsements, which are used primarily by the union leadership. These separate policies can be adapted more easily and prevent the constitution from becoming unwieldy – though GEO-UM still attempts to incorporate membership feedback. For example, their policy on endorsements was designed using a membership-wide survey (interview 8).

Governance documents tend to consider their entire membership to be the highest authority in decision-making – a body that can be mobilized through elections and general membership meetings. But elections are often annual, and membership meetings may be held as infrequently as once per semester, or remain largely informative until organizing “heats up” during bargaining (interview 8). Therefore, to keep the union running in between, graduates have developed a wide range of representation and decision-making structures, including stewards, officers, bargaining teams, committees, working-groups, caucuses, and paid staff.

Stewards are rank-and-file members who volunteer as representatives of a union. At GEO-UM most stewards are elected within academic departments, allowing graduate workers to adapt representation to existing academic and social processes. Some departments hold formal elections, but most follow an informal process of recruitment and training by previous stewards (interview 8). GEO-UM works to “seamlessly bring members through a leadership pipeline,” for example, by encouraging stewards to become leaders in working-groups and elected positions (interview 10). In slight contrast to this model, GSOC elects 30 voting stewards allocated to six “districts” by school, thereby grouping workers who share similar wages, conditions, and administrative structure (interview 12). TAA, meanwhile, has a hybrid steward council structure, with two elected unit-wide co-chairs who focus on “bigger picture” issues; eight lead stewards who are “intermediaries” that divide up turf through informal conversations; and no limit to department-level stewards with a range of involvement (interview 6). Interviewees suggested that steward positions are not always filled and some departments are left unrepresented.

Many graduate unions are mandated to have elected officers by their parent union’s constitution. A typical executive board includes officers such as president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer and may also include committee representatives. But having an

“executive” body can promote hierarchy: “call someone president and people think they have the power” (interview 9). Conversely, some unions have attempted to organize more horizontally, for example, by rotating between “facilitators” (interview 7) or opening meeting agendas to rank-and file members (interviews 3 & 4).

Interviewees discussed various mechanisms for determining a bargaining team. Some unions appoint their elected officers to bargain. Other unions elect their bargaining teams separately, like GEO-UIUC, which in 2017 elected their “bargaining research team” as a slate (about twelve members). Still others, in small units like at American University and Tufts University (members of whom participated in a teach-in with Syracuse Graduate Employees United), have depended upon whoever is willing and available. Elections create accountability but representation can be imperfect. For example, GWC’s bargaining committee had to make decisions outside their purview over the summer because of low engagement (interview 2). Furthermore, formal accountability like recall procedures may prove “unwieldy” and thus force organizers to use “social norms” to hold one another accountable (interview 2). UC Student-Workers Union recently changed their Bylaws to include reforms like term limits, but even still has experienced “loopholes” (interview 9).

While designations vary, some unions have additional longer-term bodies with an established and ongoing purpose, which I call “committees”, and/or shorter-term ad-hoc bodies with more immediate, issue-based objectives, which I call “working groups”. Committees are more established and often core to the structure of the union. Examples of committee purposes include communications, grievances, governance, finance, events, membership, and solidarity. By contrast, working groups shift depending on the priorities of those involved (interview 8). They might focus on issues like feminism or anti-racism, or objectives such as an event or campaign.

As one example, GEO-UM has a working group that consults with human resources to develop bargaining demands for transgender medical procedures (interview 8). By focusing on tangible issues in this way, unions can appeal to wider constituencies (interview 12). Small unions like SENS might view the above groups as unnecessary bureaucracy and instead divide work within one umbrella organizing committee (interview 4). Some unions also have “caucuses” – a designation which here refers to an ideological political association that any member can create or join. For example, Academic Workers for a Democratic Union (AWDU) is a caucus that grew out of 2009-2010 student movements at UC Student-Workers Union and has spread to other unions with the aim of promoting union democracy and rank-and-file power (interview 9).

In addition to these organizational bodies composed of members, unions affiliated with a parent organization have paid staff. Depending on the parent union, unit size, and stage of campaign, paid staff range from one full-time staff member for a statewide union (i.e. Workers Union) to five or six staff members working on campus during an organizing drive (i.e. GWC). Staff responsibilities may include: consultation, bookkeeping, logistical support, communications, grievance representation, and bargaining support. Many parent unions also provide paid organizers to support organizing campaigns. These staff organizers face a “structural tension” between empowering graduates to develop meaningful relationships on the one hand, and simply using “token graduate students” (organizer 3) to get more membership cards, petition signatures, or strike pledges, on the other. Such organizing tools can help prevent workers from “tuning out” during organizing conversations by increasing their investment in the union (interview 5) – but they can also be used “transactionally” by staff organizers as *the* measures of success without necessarily enabling meaningful conversations (interview 2). Further, because paid union staff are knowledgeable and experienced, they might make graduate

workers feel like “they don’t know anything or it’s not their place” to make a suggestion (interview 10). To reduce these tensions, some unions have hired current or previous organizers from that campus – “building [staff] organically out of the community” (interview 5). SENS (Student Employees at the New School) and GSOC have in their contract assistantship-type graduate staff positions paid by the university. For GEO-UM, which has two staff organizers and one “finance and office manager”, the vice president acts as a liaison between staff and membership, which includes holding biweekly meetings with staff about ongoing activities to “mak[e] sure that they’re spending their time towards the goals that we’ve set as members, as stewards, as officers” (interview 10). GEO-UM’s engaged members who want to drive the agenda and priorities make this easier; when membership isn’t as active, staff may be all but forced to do a lot of directing (interview 10).

Formalized union procedures and positions may not be the best option for every union. Workers Union at UNC assumes the role of maintaining an organization to facilitate an “effective environment for labor organizing to happen,” but unlike other unions, direct actions are primarily organized by a “separate but related... core organizing group” (interview 11). One interviewee believes that formal and regularized union meetings cannot meet the “level of chaos in this labor environment”; instead, it’s the informal group of core organizers who show up at direct actions then “hop in a classroom and plan the next one” (interview 11). This model is especially necessary in the south, where organizing can be dangerous (especially if you’re not white). Not only are union leaders legally unable to call strikes, they are easy targets for scrutiny from the far right and law enforcement by virtue of being public representatives (interview 11).

Each union must develop governance structures that are suitable to that union’s context, but most important is empowering members to be involved. For example, when union staff at UAW-

2110 negotiated a controversial “Bargaining Framework Agreement” in fall 2018 without GWCs knowledge, members were divided over whether to accept this agreement made on their behalf. Rather than throw up their hands, organizers used the controversy to invigorate discussions on accountability – so despite this all happening over Thanksgiving weekend, meeting attendance soared (with the help of a video feed). Members discussed opinions over email and text, and over 1,700 ballots were cast in a vote where members ultimately accepted the agreement. The important lesson from their experience is that when conflicts inevitably arise, “what matters is how many people are in the room to resolve it” (interview 3). In other words, “there is no substitute for a real, bottom-up organizing model” (McAlevey 2016; 206).

Graduate workers’ capacities at the workplace scale

For organizations to improve graduate working conditions they must develop effective capacities to envision and create change. Literature on union renewal argues for a shift in emphasis from *servicing* capacities – “providing support to members” – to *organizing* capacities – “actively engaging members” (Fairbrother 2015, 562). This requires that members unite in coordinated actions around shared interests. While unions include diverse workers with a variety of needs and visions, strategies that emphasize minority identities risk creating divisions between workers who are otherwise united in workplaces and wage relations (Rutherford 2010). Instead, unions can use “strategic intersectionality” to center “the mix of subjective and structural gendered, racialised, juridical or class-based forms of oppression and exploitation, with the aim of uniting workers” (Alberti 2016, 89). In other words, unions can emphasize diversity of experiences and needs to enrich their capacities to develop and advance collective demands. This section summarizes interviewees’ perspectives on graduate union capacities including: strategies

for collective bargaining and goals for contracts; direct action to win strong contracts and other concessions; transparency and communication when determining priorities; ensuring broad and intersectional representation; and overcoming legal constraints on union capacities.

Collective bargaining enables unions to negotiate legally-binding contracts with management. A contract overcomes the disjuncture between discrete workplace conditions by re-scaling specific grievances as collective concerns, thus validating unique working experiences while remaining strategically united. Contracts between management and graduate unions protect and expand benefits like health insurance (including dental, vision, and mental health), childcare, and parking; guarantee offer letters and tuition waivers, prohibit part-time assistantships and job re-classifications, and protect hours caps and paid leave; institute grievance procedures and due process, protecting everyone especially precarious workers from discrimination; and prevent management from taking advantage of graduate turnover and lack of institutional memory to cut labor costs. In short, contracts formalize agreements on anything graduates are willing to fight for.

One strategy to heighten pressure on management as well as educate members about collective bargaining is to bring as many members as possible to the bargaining table (interview 9). For example, SENS held open bargaining sessions where rank-and-file members shared testimonies to substantiate demands on healthcare and wages (interview 5). The bargaining committee used these testimonies, as well as survey responses, to confront out-of-touch management who questioned the relevance of some concerns. Several interviewees stressed that bargaining is most effective when demands are consistent and well-supported.

In the case that management doesn't negotiate in good faith, graduates can either try to hold them accountable in court – which unions at private universities are refraining from as the Trump

administration's National Labor Relations Board is working to instead make graduate unions illegal again – or they can heighten pressure on management. SENS sought and received public support from state and national politicians including Bernie Sanders and Chelsea Clinton to pressure The New School into bargaining (interview 5). Some interviewees suggested that alumni, donors, or trustees could similarly be leveraged to pressure management. Graduate organizers have also published in popular media outlets and local radio to create broader awareness of their struggles. More confrontational toward management are repertoires of direct action, which include petitions, rallies, walkouts, sit-ins, flyering, grade-ins, and strikes. In some ways direct action targets are “nebulous”, and objectives include broader education and solidarity (interview 6); but if the goal is to pressure management, these actions are visible, loud, and disruptive. TAA held a mobile rally where they hung testimonials about the burden of student fees in the administration building before marching to the Bursar's office (interview 6). Interviewees from unions that had recently been on strike described how striking workers picketed high-traffic buildings to prevent other workers (like faculty and service employees) from crossing picket lines. For their recent strike, GEO-UIUC rallied on the main quad and throughout campus, occupied the president's office (for just under 24 hours during bargaining), and shut down as much of campus as possible (interview 1). GWC mapped out delivery entrances and picketed there as early 6:00am so delivery workers could refuse to cross (interview 2). During strikes, unions may feel pressured to stifle dissent “to continue the strike as a united front for as long as possible... rather than pause to question their tactics” (Whitford 2014, 23); but strikes and strike threats are much more effective when support is genuine and not forced (interview 5).

While collective bargaining is an important capacity for unions, it doesn't foreclose other strategies. Direct action can put significant pressure on management to meet other worker demands besides bargaining concessions. Smaller-scale actions – such as winning office space for graduates in one department – can help “seed collective action inside the department” (interview 2). As another example, GEO-UM held a sit-in at a department meeting to show support for a worker with grievance on a rescinded tuition waiver (interview 10). In addition to pressuring management, publicizing grievances can further spread awareness about unfavorable working conditions (interview 12). Graduates might also create networks based on shared experiences or develop resources and trainings (interview 12).

Interviewees stressed that transparency and communication are especially important to keep membership united and strengthen capacities. Leadership can maintain contact with members through email, social media, newsletters, and stewards. Surveys are also a common method for determining bargaining priorities with member input. Ideally management will provide information to the union organizers on working agreements (such as salaries) in the request for information at the beginning of bargaining, but organizers might also benefit from collecting their own data for reference (interview 2). Despite conducting their survey over the summer, SENS collected responses from a majority of their unit by using a Google form which members could fill out online or with an organizer over the phone (interview 5). At GWC, an impressive 2,500 out of their 3,300-3,600-person unit completed a bargaining survey in spring 2017 – though about two years later after no bargaining, the data needed updating (interview 2). Unions may also hold votes on bargaining priorities or “bottom lines” – demands the union will not concede – at membership meetings (interview 8). Done well, a contract campaign is a multi-year process of actively seeking feedback from membership in many forms (interview 8).

While communication technologies may reduce *relative* distance between workers (Herod 2012, 338) GWC has had “robust discussion” about whether the organizing committee listserv does in fact promote democratic participation, or whether long e-mail chains can be difficult to follow, promote burnout, and fail to resolve disputes (interview 3). Some have attempted to address such concerns by using Slack, a communications app that organizes discussion – but it can be difficult to get members comfortable with a new platform (interview 7). Due to the inadequacy of all forms of electronic updates, Workers Union reached out to their members through one-on-one conversations to systematically involve them in an important decision on whether to increase dues (interview 7). Ultimately, interviewees suggested that decisions are more powerful and less likely to create internal conflict when they are discussed and approved with broad participation by members.

There may be controversy over how to connect union work to intersectional organizing like anti-racism, anti-sexism, immigrant rights, etc. (interview 9). For one, union members can “practice [their] politics” by contributing intersectional analysis of how social phenomena like race and gender oppress already exploited workers, both through internal discussions and public statements (interview 8). GWC for example, released a solidarity statement after a racist incident on campus; however, it included support for a demand to change the core curriculum, which created conflict with TAs who could be affected by such changes (interview 2). Additionally, graduates mentioned providing court support for anti-racist organizers (interview 11), supporting an effort to win a student of color only space on campus (interview 5), supporting sanctuary campuses, and defending and expanding Title IX protections and resources (interview 12). Contracts can also be a powerful tool to mitigate many forms of oppression. In the past, graduate unions have centralized demands for affirmative action and diversification of the graduate

student body to appeal to people of color (Rhoads and Rhoades 2005, 257). GEO-UM's most recent contract includes the creation of six paid graduate assistantships on a diversity committee – but some organizers were disheartened by concessions from the initial demand for 20, leading them to become less involved with the union (interview 8). As this example demonstrates, graduates may decide to channel their energy toward non-union struggles that they feel have “more of an impact on society” (Whitford 2014, 22).

A major obstacle for capacity-building in the current political climate, right-to-work laws are making it more difficult for graduate organizers to maintain membership, thereby reducing resources and bases of mobilization. Since the 2018 Supreme Court ruling *Janus v. American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees*, public sector unions cannot require non-members to pay fair share dues to cover the benefits they get from working a union job. Organizers at public universities therefore have the added burden of “convinc[ing] people to pay for something they could get for free” (interview 1). In addition to a precipitous drop in membership from about 70% to under 60% of graduate workers, GEO-UM also experienced more “insidious” effects from this ruling. For example, teaching assistant (TA) training coordinators announced during the TA orientation that attending GEO's presentation was “optional” despite language making it mandatory in GEO's contract (interview 8). State labor law is especially stacked against unions in states like North Carolina, where collective bargaining is actually illegal. In general, there is a lack of attention to organizing in the south: “a lot of people don't realize how difficult or repressive it is” (interview 7). Workers there, for example, might be reluctant to strike not only for fear of retribution from their employer but also “because there are so many men with guns” (interview 11).

In such negative environments, unions might frame dues as an investment with a return, emphasizing the benefits of the union. Or, to reach those who don't feel they need a union, organizers may encourage inter-departmental connections to "mak[e] our working conditions legible to one another" (interview 10). But some also believe that "you shouldn't measure the strength of the union by how many people pay dues" since "it's better to have people show-up than sign-up" (interview 11). As a testament to this sentiment, while GEO-UIUC's pre-Janus fair-share dues got people's "foot in the door" to become members, it also resulted in the union de-prioritizing consistent organizing, which ultimately reduced mobilization capacity during bargaining (interview 1). It's even possible for membership to become "a negative focus for unions," especially considering unions' historical failure to use dues to build effective worker power (interview 11). An organizer from Worker's Union says of their dues, "\$17 is the price of three lattes a month but if you need those three lattes to be an effective organizer, that's what you should do." Of course, dues fund legal services and staff support among other things which are incredibly important; but a union's "real value" comes from rank-and-file "unionists who aren't the ones getting paid" (interview 11). While parent unions can provide useful support, to win an effective contract, only "a rank and file strategy works, it's what builds power, it's what scares management, it's what wins, and it's what builds the labor movement" (interview 4).

Graduate workers' organizations at larger community scales

Despite a tendency within unions to emphasize opposition with community organizations, oppression transgresses these boundaries between workplaces and other communities (Alberti 2016). Furthermore, the only way to reconcile and forward the various and sometimes conflicting interests within the working-class is by "scaling-up" to consider the "geographically

diverse needs and power of workers” (Tufts 2007, 2385). Graduate unions have begun to challenge boundaries that separate them from other workers by pursuing organizational alliances with various communities, ranging from informal relationships to regularized meetings and partnerships that “persist past individuals” (interview 11). Interviewees for this research discussed organizational collaborations with other workers and unions on campus, graduate unions on other campuses, student organizations, and other working-class communities.

Some graduate unions have fought to organize in the same bargaining unit as other workers on campus to facilitate larger-scale organizing. For example, UC Student-Workers union recently succeeded in overturning a state law in California that excludes *research* assistants from unionizing (interview 9). SENS’ unit covers *all* student workers at The New School including undergraduates (interview 5). Graduate workers at Rutgers and CUNY (among others) organize in the same bargaining unit as faculty members. While tenure-track faculty are not automatic allies and, in some cases, may be adversaries as graduates’ direct supervisors, graduates in such unions have notably experienced the “most favorable treatment in collective bargaining”, likely because graduates have “less clout on campus” than faculty (Julius and Gumpert 2002, 199). GEO-UM allows workers excluded from their bargaining unit to attend meetings and vote as “associate members” for a smaller dues payment with the incentive that, “a rising tide lifts all boats” (interview 1). For example, management may improve all health insurance plans to maintain consistency. Some have pursued collaborations with other existing unions on campus. Even if not performing academic labor as such, campus workers from cafeterias, buildings and grounds, or parking can nevertheless be thought of as “education workers” in that they “create an environment that supports the education of the undergraduate” (interview 11).

Some graduate unions collaborate with other graduate unions. Most exemplary are graduate workers throughout the University of California public system, who organize and bargain together in one unit. Other campuses are more loosely connected – sharing information, experiences, tactics, and inspiration. Coalition of Graduate Employee Unions (CGEU) holds an annual four-day conference in August to build networks between organizers and expand sector-wide organizing across the U.S. and Canada. An organizer involved in CGEU said that it “has always been difficult to generate interest,” speculating that organizers may be pre-occupied with their local unions (interview 9). Some graduate unions participate in regular phone calls, whether organized through parent unions or groups like Alliance of Graduate Employee Locals (interview 1 & 9). Several interviewees discussed supporting other graduate workers in the area on picket lines, hosting rallies together, and attending events together.

Interviewees’ also discussed organizing with various non-union student organizations. Interviewees described involvement in movement-style organizing on campus such as campaigns against racist speakers, incidents, and symbols on campus; leftist and socialist groups on campus; and Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) for Justice in Palestine. Some graduates have mobilized to elect pro-union representatives to student government. According to interviewees, student governments – both undergraduate and graduate – may be reticent to support unions because of unions’ adversarial relationship toward management. On the other hand, one interviewee worries that student governments’ lack of antagonism with university management could de-radicalize the union if they decide to partner (interview 9).

Interviewees suggested that many graduate union members have personal involvement in a wide range of other organizations and when relevant, “connections are activated” (interview 9). However, some suggested that these could remain informal or short-term connections. Unions

might have a “solidarity committee” to cultivate lasting relationships with other organizations on campus and in the community. GEO-UM hosts regular events (e.g. lunches) where they invite people from different organizations who might be sympathetic (including anti-racist organizers, College Democrats, Democratic Socialists of America, etc.) in an attempt “to sustain ties” with on the ground battles (interview 8). Some campuses have university-wide labor councils. Organizers at NYU (led by Law Students for Economic Justice) are creating a council to coordinate between all eleven known campus unions – many of which are sub-contracted and therefore not employed by NYU (interview 12). A labor council at University of Michigan includes a broad coalition of activist and leftist political groups. One example of their initiatives is collaboration on a document to educate an ally in management on the history of labor at the university. Members also have long-term ambitions of building broader solidarity with all workers (not just those in unions) by, for example, setting a prevailing wage policy (interview 8). Similarly, Workers Union is involved in Durham Workers Assembly, which aims to empower citywide campaigns against local public officials and employers (interview 11).

Notably, some unions have found it difficult to bridge the disconnect between graduate workers and workers in the surrounding area (interview 6). Graduate students can be perceived as “maximally privileged petty bourgeois workers” and may be exposed to “trained classism” at universities (interview 11). Some graduate demands – like full tuition waivers – may sound *too* demanding to those unfamiliar with the context (interview 1). Furthermore, as a major employer, residents may view the university favorability so “just going out and saying the university was evil was not going to make you friends – you needed to prove it first” (interview 1).

Workers Union’s organization stands out from all other unions represented by interviewees in their structural partnership with campus and other state workers. Historically, Workers Union

was a housekeepers' union but the chapter that re-started in 2017 makes “no division between different types of workers (campus or graduate)... excluding supervisors” (UE Local 150 Workers Union at UNC Philosophy and Structure). Their current parent union, United Electric Local 150 (UE-150), is a statewide union open to all public workers in North Carolina including chapters of municipal, sanitation, and health and human services workers. In the big picture, this type of industrial-style union is “much more hardened against the geographic reorganizing of [workplaces]” (interview 11) because workers gain leverage and overcome competition between groups by coordinating at higher scales (Tufts 2007). Some other reasons organizers chose to affiliate with UE-150 in 2017 include: experience organizing in the South (e.g. \$15 minimum wage campaign); low dues and staff who don't make more than the highest-paid members; emphasis on rank-and-file power in contrast with what felt like a “sales pitch” from SEIU; a “working-class sensibility” (which contrasts with student-centric graduate unions); and as a majority black union, an emphasis on justice for non-white workers that facilitates “building inter-racial and inter-class alliances” (interview 7 & 11). Importantly, the union still has a distinctly academic character with, for example, disproportionately few campus workers and people of color at meetings. Nevertheless, Workers Union is exemplary of graduate workers' pursuit of solidarity with other workers through establishing a shared organizational structure.

Graduate workers' capacities at larger community scales

Unions may hold tension between the “narrow terrain” of “contract unionism” limited to the bargaining unit (Gindin 2016) and capacities that unite larger working-class communities around broader agendas. As graduate unions construct larger-scale communities, they can develop capacities of mutual support and new targets of action with these communities. This section

discusses capacities that graduate workers have exercised alongside community partners including: sharing information and spreading awareness, sharing complementary skills, increasing people power, targeting issues of higher education, and challenging state power.

At a basic level, connections with other communities enable unions to spread awareness and open communications between broader groups of workers. Graduate unions may use student newspapers to increase publicity of union activities on campus, though reporters may not always be allies (interview 3). Public “solidarity statements” can also be powerful, especially if targeted at a local issue so it “riles the right feathers”, “reaches a target that needs to be reached”, spreads awareness, and/or identifies action-items to relevant folks (interview 3 & 4). However, without clear goals, solidarity statements may only make organizers feel good while taking energy from other efforts. To make solidarity statements stronger, Workers Union has a “solidarity fund” set aside to increase the impact of statements with material financial support (interview 7).

Some graduate workers attend faculty and student governance meetings to stay in the loop on university activities (interview 7) or gain insight into management’s response to bargaining (interview 5). For example, through student government the union may be able to connect with existing lobbying for legislation that benefits graduate students (interview 12). According to interviewees, both faculty and student senates have passed statements in support of union campaigns to create broader awareness and support. SENS also maintained consistent communications with the faculty senates at The New School during their strike campaign in fall 2018, which enabled the union to ask faculty to inform students about the strike and hold classes off campus (interview 4). By contrast, GEO-UIUC did not approach the faculty senate and instead found themselves in conflict over their demand of full tuition waivers for all graduate workers, an issue which is partly the purview of the faculty senate (interview 1).

Working with student groups may help garner support among undergraduate students, who can help by writing op-eds, supporting direct actions, or organizing their TAs (interviews 2, 3 & 5). Graduate unions can also support student campaigns. For example, GWC reached out to the Columbia Student of Color Caucus and Black Student Organization on campus after a racist attack to ensure the union's response was aligned with these groups, who are better situated to respond to such incidents (interview 3). As another example, UC Student-Workers union donated resources (e.g. office space, money for food and transportation) to student movements in 2009 and 2010, when students occupied buildings and disrupted regents meetings (interview 9). Furthermore, because students are future workers, university unions can also play an important role in "ideological training" (Singh et al. 2006, 56). Organizers can "make students aware they should be looking for unions at their workplace and be prepared to start one themselves" (interview 11).

Different types of workers can complement one another with a "diversity of tools" from a variety of occupational skillsets and circumstances. Graduates have flexible schedules (interview 3) as well as diverse knowledges. Campus workers "have been here [on campus] much longer than any graduate would possibly be," hence they have institutional knowledge that graduates can draw from for logistical and strategic advice (interview 12). Interactions with campus workers can also be supportive and affirming ("what you mean they don't think you're workers?") and also remind graduates "how f***ed over people are on a systematic level" by the same management (interview 3). When campus workers were on strike in 1998 at Syracuse University, faculty, staff, and students created a support group and listserv, held public meetings and a teach-in, signed letters and a petition to the chancellor, walked picket lines, and invited striking workers to speak in their classes (Schell 2001, 43).

When workers join together, they increase their “people power” to make direct actions stronger (interview 10). Graduates might work with other unions through their parent unions’ statewide and local boards or joint councils. GEO-UM shares an office with Lecture Employee Organizers (who are also affiliated with American Federation of Teachers), which facilitates a “twin mobilizing capacity” (interview 8). They also share costs of rent, utilities, and office supplies, which allows them a bigger space – an asset that can also be shared with allies (interview 10). Unions may also have a vested material interest in one another’s contracts since management can leverage them for “parody” increases (interview 5).

In terms of people power, a “solidarity strike” is perhaps “the most concrete material way to show solidarity” (interview 9). In 2013, under AWDU leadership, UC Student-Workers Union struck with the sole purpose of supporting the one-day strike by AFSCME 3299 – a union of Service and Patient Care Technical workers (and California’s largest union). For AFSCME 3299’s strike in October 2018, UC Student-Workers Union – now under leadership of the Organizing for Student Worker Power (OSWP) caucus – didn’t call a solidarity strike but still refused to cross striking workers’ picket lines (interview 9). During GWC’s strike, upwards of 50 construction workers on their lunch break (hard hats, neon vests, and all) re-invigorated a rally with their presence in a “moment of incredible energy” (interview 2). Small gestures can show appreciation for support. For example, GWC thanked workers who didn’t cross their picket line with homemade bread and cookies (interview 2).

Although it may be difficult to make connections with organizers beyond college campuses, one way to do that is to send organizers to conferences. About eight years after TAA occupied the Wisconsin state capital alongside MTI (the Madison public K-12 teachers union) in response to Act 10 (a right-to-work-style state law), the two unions re-developed a “working relationship”

at the 2018 Labor Notes conference during a Black Lives Matters Week of Action panel. MTI organizers subsequently developed curriculum and events at K-12 schools for a February week of action, which TAA supported (interview 6). Similarly reaching beyond the university campus, two Workers Union organizers volunteer by staffing events and helping distribute a monthly newsletter at the Jackson Center, an oral history and community preservation organization in a gentrifying black neighborhood. This partnership had immediate benefits, such as recruiting Campus Workers living in the neighborhood, as well as less tangible benefits of long-term solidarity (interview 7).

Some interviewees discussed limited attempts to build capacities targeting academic concerns such as institutional decision-making, academic freedom, and corporatization. Back in the early 1970s, TAA struck on a demand that graduate teaching assistants and undergraduates participate in planning curriculum for all classes – until faculty threatened to resign on the issue (interview 6). Less radical and more recently, GEO-UM’s contract encourages departments to include graduate workers in planning curriculum and class sizes. GEO-UM is also pressuring for representation on a committee to create a policy for letters of recommendation following a high-profile controversy on the issue (interview 8). At CUNY, graduates have organized around (albeit unsuccessfully) “financial democratization and transparency” by pressuring for “line-by-line accounting of the budget” and hosting “speak-outs” on participatory budgeting (Bader 2018). And somewhat relatedly, TAA has an Anti-Foxconn “working-group”, which takes action against academic partnerships with corporations – for example flyer at a recruiting fair where Foxconn was present (interview 6).

Electoral politics is another capacity to affect change for a wider constituency of workers. However, some unions, like GEO-UIUC, stay out of electoral politics almost entirely (interview

1). Others have something like TAA's Political Education Committee, which hosts phone banks, registers voters, canvasses, and recommends endorsements (approved by membership) with an emphasis on local politics (interview 6). Less radical unions tend to support the Democratic Party (interview 9); but historically, this strategy has not paid off as the "seemingly optimal conditions" during two, two-term democratic presidencies (Obama and Clinton) "did not lead to a significant reform in union rights" (Murray 2017, 18). Challenges in holding politicians accountable and connecting electoral work to union demands may lead to questions over whether the "real estate of messaging dedicated to electoral work" drains resources from other important areas (interview 6). Ultimately, electoral work as a "top-down political effort is quite distinct from rebuilding labor's political strength at the grassroots" (Turner & Hurd 2001, 25). It is for reasons like this that unions may consider refraining from electoral endorsements altogether, as is AWDU's policy, for example (interview 9).

GEO and TAA have protested against state-level right-to-work and other anti-union legislation to create a "visual and emotional record" (interview 8), but there are few examples of unions explicitly challenging the state elsewhere, with one major exception: Workers Union at UNC. Because of the negative labor organizing environment, Workers Union at UNC are taking a "broader labor approach to place more pressure on those who are really disempowering us", namely the state government (interview 11). Workers Union notably helped organize (despite technically remaining uninvolved for legal reasons) the teaching assistant grade strike in fall 2018, which successfully challenged the North Carolina state legislature to meet student and worker demands and prevent the confederate statue, Silent Sam, from returning to campus – an example of challenging state power at the department level. While the environment for labor organizing is particularly bad in the south, it's true everywhere that "who my boss is on paper is

less meaningful than who is creating the labor conditions in my area... it's not that my boss is a jerk, it's that all bosses are jerks" (interview 11). Graduate workers can learn from Workers' Union's example and begin to challenge state power themselves – "once people start saying no to the state, they're not going to stop" (interview 11).

Interviewees discussed many obstacles preventing unions from working with other communities. During contract campaigns organizers tend to be "all in" for bargaining (interview 1) and it may be infeasible to collaborate with organizations with different structures or demands (interview 5). Even workers in the same parent union may face barriers to collaboration if staff act as "gatekeepers", impairing communications with other campus unions (interview 2). Hierarchical union bureaucracies thus tend to hinder "genuinely equal partnerships with those beyond their ranks" (Wills 2001, 471). Nevertheless, interviewees described many ways in which partnerships with wider communities provided important mutual benefits.

Discussion

Fairbrother (2015) argues that for unions to renew worker power, they must transform each of their component parts: organizations, capacities, and purposes. This case study investigates how graduate workers are developing organizations and capacities to renew union power. Interviews suggest that graduate unions are prioritizing one-on-one conversations and face-to-face contact during membership drives, leadership development, and organizing campaigns. Many are also developing critical accountability structures including various forms and practices of governance. Unions in favorable legal environments appear to emphasize traditional collective bargaining power; however, to make meaningful gains many graduate unions seem to depend upon additional capacities such as direct actions including strikes, which demand significant

organizing. Graduate unions are also resisting top-down enforcement of organizing strategies, though tensions remain. While graduate unions are still working to overcome various identity-based divisions, union hierarchies, and unfavorable legal environments, they nevertheless demonstrate many aspects of rank-and-file organizations and capacities at the scale of their bargaining units that match core commitments of union renewal.

If workers remain solely focused on their bargaining unit, they may confine union renewal to narrow economic sectors. Graduate unions show evidence of beginning to coordinate larger-scale organizations of working-class communities and create new capacities by developing relationships, solidarity and collaborations on shared campaigns. However, many collaborations seem to be preliminary and primarily engage organizational leaders, rather than memberships. Further, collective bargaining does not appear to be leveraged for the benefit of wider communities. Workers Union at UNC is exceptional in its organization as an industrial-style union that includes all non-managerial workers on campus – an organization better suited to represent a broader coalition of workers on wider sets of issues. But overall, graduate unions are relatively disengaged from commitments to union renewal at higher scales. Many unions lack sustained support from diverse communities, have relatively limited allies, emphasize narrow union agendas and campaigns, and remain less focused on the role of universities and the state.

Above all else, the findings in this paper aim to promote discussion of organizing strategies among graduate unionists and beyond. For unions to renew their relevance after decades of decline, their priority must be to “engage in a period of rigorous democratic experimentalism, through which new organizational forms and new types of effective collective action will emerge” (Murray 2018, 23). Only such experimentation of union strategies will grow the third-wave of graduate unionization into a tsunami of working-class solidarity.

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Anthony J. Walker

Curriculum Vitae

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(608)-395-4210

ajwalker@syr.edu

Education

Syracuse University (Syracuse, New York)

Masters of Arts in Geography – Graduated December 2019

Primary Advisor: Jonnell Robinson, Committee Members: Tod Rutherford and Natalie Koch

Research Interests: Academic Labor Unions, Student Movements, Marxism, Praxis, Participatory Action Research, and Qualitative Methods

Vassar College (Poughkeepsie, New York)

Bachelor of Arts in Geography – Graduated May 2017

Overall GPA 3.71

Teaching Experience

Teaching Assistant, GEO383/683: Geographic Information Systems, Dr. Peng Gao (Syracuse University, Spring 2019)

Teaching Assistant, GEO 105: World Urban Geography, Dr. Natalie Koch (Syracuse University, Fall 2018)

Teaching Assistant, GEO 108: Mapping Today, Dr. Mark Monmonier (Syracuse University, Spring 2018)

Grader, GEO 372: The European City, Dr. John Western (Syracuse University, Spring 2018)

Other Work Experience

Graduate Assistant, Syracuse Community Geography (Syracuse, Fall 2017)

Education Intern, Poughkeepsie Farm Project (Poughkeepsie Sept 2015 – May 2017)

Skills

ArcGIS Software – GEO 683: Geographic Information Systems (Syracuse University, Fall 2017), GEOG 220: Spatial Analysis (Vassar College, Spring, 2015), Applied GIS experience as Graduate Assistant at Syracuse Community Geography (see above).

Qualitative Research Methods –GEO 610: Qualitative Methods (Syracuse University, Spring 2018)

Proficient in Spanish