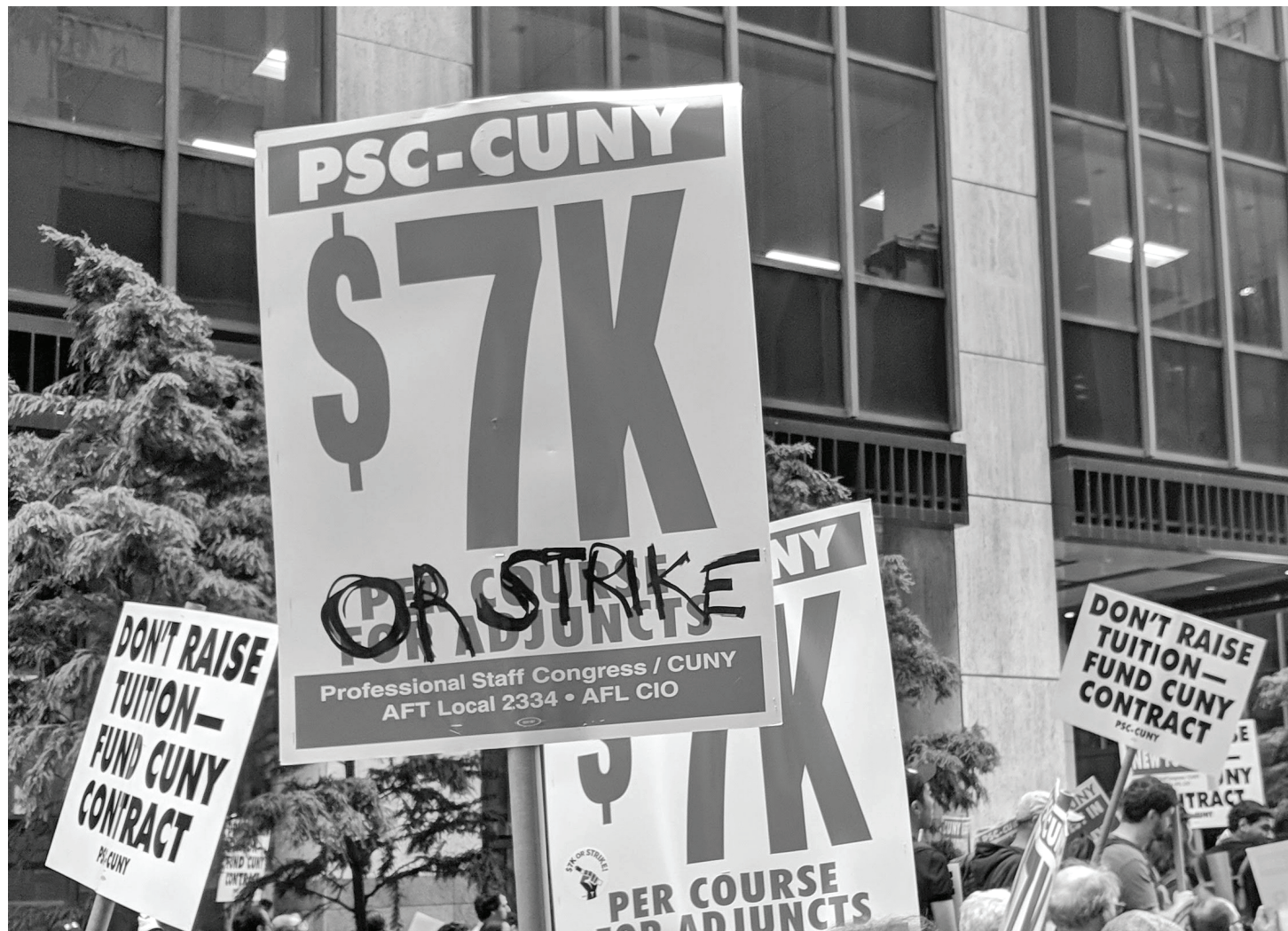


The File

NEWSPAPER OF UNIVERSITY RANK-AND-FILE WORKERS

SEPTEMBER 2019



\$7K OR STRIKE

A rank-and-file movement has caught fire across the City University of New York system. Rejecting PSC leadership's business union orthodoxy—fruitless lobbying, performative radicalism, weak contracts—the \$7K or Strike movement is mobilizing CUNY workers for a real fight against austerity.

By ZACHARY LAMALFA

Austerity has hit workers and students hard at the City University of New York. Adjunct professors across the system are paid starvation wages—as low as \$3,200 per course—forcing them to take second and third jobs to make ends meet.

Higher education officers (HEOs) and laboratory staff presently look forward to raises so pitiful they amount to pay cuts in light of steady inflation. Meanwhile students' tuition is rising annually while funding for facilities, financial assistance, and course offerings continues to evaporate. State and city austerity measures have choked access to the affordable quality education that CUNY claims to provide. And after more than two years of contract bargaining, the Professional Staff Congress (PSC), CUNY's faculty union, is still at a stalemate with management. In response, CUNY students and staff alike are asking: What is to be done? Resoundingly, they are calling for mass action.

In particular, PSC's rank-and-file has begun to stir. These members are questioning their minimized role in their union's contract fight, and have begun to organize themselves across CUNY's twenty-five campuses to raise public awareness of their demand for a living wage and a fully-funded university. Above all, they are questioning their leadership's refusal to use the most effective tool unions have against bosses' austerity measures: a strike.

LEADERSHIP LACKS STRATEGY

Union leadership purports to demand a \$7K/course minimum wage for adjunct faculty, but refuses to commit to escalating tactics should this demand not be met. As a result, an increasing number of rank-and-file PSC members have articulated a clear alternative: "\$7K or Strike." The \$7K or

Strike campaign, a grassroots movement of PSC members, has grown up around this demand, advocating a minimum of \$7000 per course for adjunct instructors, and a strike as the one way to win it.

Adjuncts, students, and other underpaid CUNY workers associated with the campaign feel that PSC's leadership is bargaining with CUNY management from a position of weakness, relying on performative tactics and lobbying, and disempowering most members in the process. A series of low-stakes demonstrations and photo-ops orchestrated by PSC's executive committee in NYC and Albany, along with vague slogans (including the recent "United for Wage Justice at CUNY"), have done little to nothing to mobilize the PSC's 30,000-person membership. "The groundbreaking teachers' strikes in Chicago, L.A. Oakland, West Virginia, and elsewhere, which won game-changing gains for students, families, and workers alike, took years to build," a statement posted to \$7K or Strike's website reads. "As rank-and-file union members, we believe that we are overdue to build toward a strike."

The \$7K or Strike campaign has its roots in years of rank-and-file organizing by labor activists operating inside and outside of PSC. Much of the campaign's infrastructure originated in a "no" campaign against PSC's 2016 austerity contract, which failed to meet inflation and widened the gap between the tiers of CUNY's academic workforce by distributing the highest wages to its highest earners. In this campaign rank-and-file activists were put on the defensive, lacking access to PSC communication channels, and having no control over the timetable of events. In the years since, many core organizers of \$7K or Strike have worked to build alternative communication apparatuses, and laid the foundation for an independent campaign for a \$7K minimum wage for CUNY adjuncts, which succeeded in late 2017 in

forcing PSC leadership to adopt this demand as their own in the present round of contract negotiations.

BUILDING TOWARDS A STRIKE

The campaign has continued to build momentum toward a credible strike threat, without official sanction or assistance, and in doing so has drastically driven up rank-and-file engagement. \$7K or Strike activists consistently draw record numbers of union members to local chapter meetings, sessions of the union's Delegate Assembly, meetings of the Committee for Adjuncts and Part-Timers (CAP), and dozens of campus demonstrations. These have included a number of "grade-ins," in which adjunct workers occupy hallways and common spaces on CUNY campuses to make their unpaid work visible. Tides of adjuncts have transformed leadership-approved grade-ins for \$7K into mass demonstrations for \$7K or Strike. On two such occasions at Brooklyn College, more than fifty adjuncts worked alongside students under \$7K or Strike banners, as well as messages like: "MOST OF MY WORK, INCLUDING THE GRADING I'M DOING RIGHT NOW, IS UNPAID."

Moreover, eleven PSC chapters have passed resolutions supporting a strike for \$7K, often at meetings with record turnout, despite the vocal opposition of chapter chairs and other paid spokespeople of central leadership.

Amid this groundswell of grassroots union power, however, PSC leadership has inched away from the \$7K per course demand that rank-and-file pressure forced it to adopt. What's more, leadership has employed scare tactics and scolding to demoralize the growing rank-and-file movement. In February, a widely circulated open letter from PSC's Principal Officers, including President Barbara Bowen, tarred adjunct activists as "divisive." The letter called \$7K or Strike's message "deceitful," and even claimed

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RUTGERS REBELLION 'We Had to Take Things Into Our Own Hands'



The Rutgers Rank-and-File Caucus discusses a strike that wasn't, the stubborn reality underlying "revolutionary contracts," and the power of bottom-up member initiative to break with business union bureaucrats.

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CGSU COLLAPSE The Union and Democracy at Cornell

A former CGSU Organizing Committee chair reflects on the union's narrow recognition election loss, transactional unionism that instrumentalizes workers, and the challenge for unions of building enduring democratic structures.

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BACKROOM BETRAYAL UAW Bargaining Framework a Gift to Columbia Admin

A backroom deal by a UAW Regional Director got the Columbia admin to the bargaining table, but by taking striking off the table for 18 months, the bureaucrats have put the boss in the driver's seat.

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FROM THE ARCHIVES Gayle Rubin & Anne Bobroff: 'the fetishism of bargaining'

The monthlong Spring 1975 strike by the University of Michigan Graduate Employees' Organization delivered a historic first contract and timeless lessons on the true sources of a union's power.

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The union and democracy at Cornell

By SENA AYUDIN

In August 2013, a Cornell lab accident left a chemistry graduate student severely injured. For many, the Cornell administration's and graduate workers' responses dramatized both graduate workers' lack of workplace protections and the potential of graduate organizing. Cornell Graduate Students United (CGSU) emerged in March 2014 with a commitment to grassroots organizing and democratic practices.

By September 2014, CGSU was a small but fully functioning graduate student union with its own organizing structure, constitution, and bylaws. It had over 150 members, about 3% of the graduate student body at that time. As membership numbers rose, the limitations of CGSU's human, financial, and legal resources grew more plain, and CGSU began then to seriously discuss affiliation with national labor organizations.

In a September 2015 membership-wide vote, CGSU chose to affiliate with American Federation of Teachers (AFT-NYSUT). The decision around affiliation was made because, unlike many other national unions, AFT explicitly recognized CGSU as an autonomous grassroots body with its own democratic organizing structure and decision-making processes.

AFT SUSPENDS DEMOCRACY

But soon after affiliation with AFT-NYSUT, it became clear that CGSU's autonomy and democratic functioning would be suspended for the next year and a half. This was justified in the name of emergency, an intensive recognition election campaign. In internal union discussions, democratic practices that had, in fact, been *terminated* by the new rules were increasingly framed as attainable *only by way of* a campaign victory. In short: from its beginning until the present, the story of CGSU has been one of the orchestrated collapse of its democratic structures and practices.

This loss of any real connection with its members was the reason that CGSU would ultimately lose its recognition election. The mechanisms of this collapse

Learning from the collapse of CGSU-AFT



Sena Ayudin, a founding member of CGSU.

were instructive: while polarization grew among CGSU's more active membership, disaffection grew among CGSU's rank and file. Both the polarization among the active and the divestment by passive membership left CGSU vulnerable to AFT-NYSUT control, which, in a vicious cycle, only compounded the disintegration of internal democratic structures.

The polarization among mobilized members was largely around AFT-NYSUT's organizing model, which actively limits the flow of information between members and their union. Among the union's most active members, critical deliberation degenerated. Across campus, graduates campus-wide reported feeling "harassed," "instrumentalized," and "deceived" by CGSU's organizing campaign. That workers began to distance themselves from union affairs out of distaste for what was happening ultimately aided AFT-NYSUT's goal of wrenching control of the union from the workers themselves. When the votes for

the recognition came in, the results were 856 for CGSU, 919 against. Another 81 ballots were challenged by either Cornell or CGSU/AFT-NYSUT.

Because the number of challenged ballots there were never enough votes for CGSU to cover their 63-vote deficit, the election remained officially "inconclusive" until those ballots were processed. This was to both AFT-NYSUT's and Cornell's liking. Cornell, of course, would prefer to forget about graduate unionization efforts altogether. For its part, AFT-NYSUT was similarly eager to bury its embarrassing loss of a million-dollar campaign on an avowedly liberal campus in the era of #resistance and rising grad unionization.

These interests prevailed over CGSU's when, in the aftermath of the election, a small number of active CGSU members "authorized" AFT-NYSUT to enter negotiations with Cornell's administration. CGSU's general membership not only played no part in this decision,

but were unaware of even the existence of these negotiations for the five months they were conducted. During this time, union-wide activities and agency were effectively "on pause." The opportunity to rebuild, to work through the experience of a passionate campaign, to reconnect with the rank and file, to learn from mistakes—in short, to face reality—was, in this period, squandered.

The fruitless negotiations ended. CGSU filed three complaints against Cornell with the American Arbitration Association. The arbitrator's decision—to certify the election results, and to affirm just one of CGSU's complaints—came over a year after the 2017 recognition election. The collapse of the bargaining unit's mobilization was demonstrated at roughly the same time, in the outcome of CGSU's annual Steering Committee election. Of the Steering Committee's thirteen seats, only two had more than one candidate running to fill them, and less than 60 out of CGSU's 1500 members took the trouble to vote online.

LESSONS FROM AFTERMATH

What can be learned from the collapse of CGSU? One lesson: building a strong union with an engaged rank-and-file, and winning a recognition election are two *separate* goals. CGSU's mistake was to conflate the two, and to distance itself from healthy democratic governance for the sake of chasing a recognition vote win. The lost election was a direct consequence of this pyrrhic sacrifice, but it was not the worst one.

The worst consequence was the change in the culture and meaning of unionization. Our union began as a space of workers' empowerment, political education, and deliberation, mobilized by an approach to social justice that aimed beyond the securing of basic rights. As CGSU compromised its democratic functioning, the union transformed into precisely what it had been formed to

fight: yet another top-down and opaque institution.

This transactional understanding of unionism has kept CGSU from ever seriously engaging with its rank and file, facing its own mistakes, or evoking an emancipatory politics ever more deeply than a "solidarity!" facebook post. At the other end of its futile compromise, CGSU's politics have become gestural, contenting itself with periodically calling-out of Cornell University for what it says or doesn't say or does or doesn't do, but never for what it *is*.

The critique of the institution itself—a corporation with a systemically exploitive relations to area workers, resources, and communities; a leading institution of class warfare; an integral, and foundationally racist and sexist cog in the American war machine—has been lost. In short, the *transactional* unionism that operates only with an eye to a "yes" recognition vote produces an uncritical, catch-all politics. This politics is incapable of analysis or critique, much less operating meaningfully to dismantle the violence at the heart of the institution.

The punchline for our union is that there's nothing left to lose. Spooked by the threat that the existing NLRB decision granting grad workers at private universities the right to unionize will be overturned, national labor federations have gone into a winter sleep on private university campuses. Perhaps counterintuitively, this is not bad news for unionization campaigns that have been run into the ground by top-down union procedures. CGSU finally has some space for rebuilding and reinvention, for honesty and creativity, and for the first time in a long time, AFT-NYSUT isn't dominating the conversation. CGSU has so far made little of these opportunities, and may well continue to decline. Meanwhile, the need and potential for democratic and grassroots unionization still urgently exists at Cornell. The task to rebuilding now is the same as it has ever been. Graduate workers must build democracy not through its obverse, but through democracy itself.

CUNY's \$7K or Strike movement on fire

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that rank-and-file activists were guilty of "insulting, confusing and alienating" other union members. PSC functionaries have gone as far as to invoke New York State's draconian Taylor Law, which prohibits public sector employees from striking, against the rank-and-file campaign. This is in spite of the fact that victorious public sector strikes have overcome this law numerous times, and that the PSC voted to authorize a strike as recently as spring 2016. PSC leadership's official resistance to bottom-up labor action is obvious. So what, then, is their alternative?

BROKEN BUSINESS UNIONISM

In short, more of the same: lobbying indifferent lawmakers in Albany and at City Hall, and engaging in protracted, locked-door bargaining sessions with CUNY management, leaving rank-and-file members immobilized and in the dark.

In recent meetings of the Delegate Assembly and CAP, PSC President Barbara Bowen and Vice President Andrea Vasquez have insisted that the union is in a position of strength to press CUNY management and secure a winning contract, but remain unable to explain how bargaining alone will tip the scales.

Indeed, the routine "Contract Updates" emailed to union members from their president contain no information about actual strategy. Members are told that slow-going negotiations are the re-

sult of deadlock between the union, management, and legislators. They read that the union sees opportunities "to push for an agreement," but encounter no specifics as to what that agreement might look like. Members are invited to run their eyes over a long list of demands, but not one concrete strategy for securing those demands. The most recent "Contract Update" dispatch closes with a section titled "What can members do this summer?"

Members can, in short, "Be alert for further updates," be aware of meetings on their campuses, and "Be ready to consider and vote on ratification of a proposed settlement whenever one is reached." Rank-and-filers are evidently not entitled to any concrete information on contract bargaining, nor real engagement in the process. They are instead expected to sit back and wait, ready to authorize whatever contract should fall into their laps, whenever that should happen.

SOCIALISM OR BARBARA-ISM

In stark contrast to such business unionism as usual, the \$7K or Strike campaign has built worker power at the university and city levels, holding demonstrations, canvassing campuses to bring adjunct workers into the union, and showing picket line solidarity with other New York and New Jersey unions, as well as immigrants' and workers' rights organizations.

Most recently, the campaign came out in support of the Rutgers Rank-and-File



Zachary LaMalfa and other PSC activists demanding no tentative contract be pushed through by leadership over the summer.

Caucus, a dissident group fighting a similar struggle against occupational chauvinism within the AAUP-AFT at Rutgers University.

\$7K or Strike has also drafted and passed resolutions at the citywide CAP, an official union body, outlining clear,

union-wide strategies for building a credible strike threat, securing funding for part-time and underpaid faculty, and preventing further tuition hikes for CUNY students. PSC leadership has either ignored these rank-and-file resolutions entirely, or been careful to remind

members that these bodies, and the local chapters adopting \$7K or Strike resolutions, are in fact "not decision-making groups." In the face of official resistance, however, \$7K or Strike's organized push to delay a rushed contract agreement during the summer, when union members are least engaged, has proven successful. This most recent victory is particularly poignant in light of the 2016 contract, which passed over the summer, with little opportunity to publicize opposition. Many members voted to approve that contract simply because they thought voting "no" wasn't a serious choice.

This time around, the message of adjuncts, students, and staff behind \$7K or Strike is clear: they would rather struggle hard and win real gains than give in to yet another austerity contract. They hold that New York State's anti-strike laws are only as strong as their union is weak, and that broad rank-and-file involvement is the key to building a strong union. These rank-and-file members have absorbed, rather than cautiously avoided, the obvious conclusions to be drawn from the recent public sector strike wave in the US, and have proven that \$7K or Strike is the only demand that catalyzes CUNY's far-flung and exhausted adjuncts. As a new academic year approaches, \$7K or Strike stands poised to assert union democracy, to break the grip of business unionism on CUNY, to build a real strike threat, and win transformative gains for CUNY and New York City's working class.

UAW bargaining framework a gift to Columbia admin

By SONAM SINGH

After the Harvard administration caved to the graduate workers of HGSU in May 2018, the Columbia administration knew they'd lost the fight on bargaining with GWC-UAW.

Facing mounting anger from graduate workers, a national strike wave by educators, ongoing pressure from politicians, the recent unionization of CU postdocs, the impending contract renewal of the support staff union also in the UAW, and the credible threat of an indefinite strike by GWC, their options for further delay were dwindling.

So why is UAW leadership staff trying to throw Lee Bollinger a 15-month life-line?

Some essential background: like my union Barnard Contingent Faculty (BCF-UAW), Graduate Workers of Columbia (GWC-UAW) is a bargaining unit within the NYC-based UAW Local 2110, which is itself part of UAW Region 9A. Above them is the International UAW, headquartered in Detroit.

NO BACKROOM DEALS

From Detroit to Morningside Heights, all of us in the UAW share a commitment to fighting for workers, but history has shown that the strategies and ideologies of union bureaucracies do not always align with those of rank-and-file workers. Working through these conflicts with clear transparency is essential to sustaining the strength and increasing the militancy of the labor movement.

Which brings us to the proposed framework that UAW leadership staff are encouraging GWC rank-and-file workers to adopt. The manner in which this proposed framework was negotiated is discrediting in itself. You cannot build worker power by intentionally locking workers out of negotiations with management, as appears to have been the case here.

GWC has a democratically-elected Bargaining Committee, who are the only legitimate representatives of Columbia grad workers. By going behind their backs, UAW staff have undercut this Committee's authority. They have essentially sent the Columbia administration the signal that while the other side of the bargaining table may channel the anger, insights, and idealism of thousands of graduate workers, the real deals will be cut with union bureaucrats conditioned to settle faster and settle for less.

More distressingly, by conceding strike activity until April 2020, the proposed framework all but guarantees no meaningful progress on a contract will be made until the weeks before April 2020.

EDITORS' NOTE: This article was written prior to the membership vote that approved the framework agreement by 59%.

Bureaucrats trade away strike power



During an earlier weeklong strike in April 2018, the GWC organizing committee discusses logistics and a proposal to extend the strike.

Whether now or later, experience shows it will take a credible strike threat to get the Columbia administration to take bargaining seriously and assent to proposals that meaningfully address GWC's bargaining goals.

Given the Columbia administration's tenacious contempt for workers and its deep pockets, a union bargaining without a strike threat is bargaining from a position of weakness. Yes, the proposed framework would commit Columbia to "good faith" bargaining, but as I learned serving on a Bargaining Committee, the legal standard for "good faith" merely requires the employer to schedule regular meetings, offering proposals with micro concessions at the trivial edges of the workers' demands. It does not require working towards achieving agreement.

Columbia's trained union busters will relish having 14 months of guaranteed strike-free bargaining to demean and dispirit the GWC Bargaining Committee with condescending rejections of their demands, insulting counter proposals that come in below the status quo, and a constant volley of slights and insults.

And they will count on their UAW staff counterparts to encourage concessionary activity, significantly narrowing the bargaining agenda to Columbia's advantage. That is to say, if GWC waits until April 2020 to strike, you'll be striking for much, much less.

BARGAINING FROM WEAKNESS

Even dealing with the more pliant and less competent administration at Barnard, it quickly became clear after almost a year of fruitless negotiating, that the main job of our Bargaining Committee should have been to prepare our mem-

bers for a strike from day 1. All significant bargaining only happened after we set a strike deadline.

Strike now or strike later. Strike now and strike later. Nothing in the proposed framework will obviate the need to recreate all of 2018's strike organizing again in 2020. But forgoing 2018's strike for so little in return (and taking striking off the table for so long) suggests to Columbia that the national UAW's commitment to supporting a meaningful strike is low, and the administration's chances of securing a more favorable contract are high.

The bottom line is that, if the proposed framework is adopted, the Columbia administration will simply have to meet its bare minimum legal obligation to bargain—where it was already ineluctably headed. GWC, on the other hand, will enter bargaining with a compromised Bargaining Committee that has already acquiesced to troublingly amorphous concessions over "academic and governance issues" and with no access for over a year to its most essential tool, the strike. And the real fight over a first contract is deferred until after cohorts of currently engaged activists have graduated. This is all good news for Lee Bollinger.

If the proposed framework is rejected and a strike commences, the union will have to explain repeatedly why it "walked away," risking internal dissension, complicating its public messaging, and a loss of momentum. That is to say, even if the framework is rejected, the December strike may suffer the effects of this clumsy interference by union bureaucrats. Also not a bad outcome for Lee Bollinger.

This is a self-inflicted wound upon labor organizing at our university by union bureaucrats who have lost touch with the interests of the union's workers.

Framework signals national UAW lacks will for sustained strike.

FROM THE ARCHIVES

'On the fetishism of bargaining...'

Bobroff and Rubin published the leaflet (abridged here) near the end of the 1975 strike that won the first contract for University of Michigan grads.

By ANNE BOBROFF and GAYLE RUBIN

Many people have begun to notice that there is *not* a direct correlation between time spent at the bargaining table and results obtained. Often whole days of negotiations go by with nothing actually accomplished. On the other hand, there have been occasions when huge gains have been made with very little time spent at the table.

This was the case with Affirmative Action. The University refused to bargain on this issue for eight months. Then, during the first days of the strike, the Black United Front handed the U a leaflet endorsing our proposal and signed by the 22 separate groups united in BUF. First those nasty GEO picket lines at every turn—and now this evidence that the spirit of BAM was far from dead! The combination undoubtedly recalled to the Administration dread images of that earlier, less peaceful strike and, fearing a repeat, they capitulated immediately. They accepted the proposal we had on the table at that point, lock, stock, and barrel, with little haggling over the fine points.

Sexual preference, too, was a stumbling block at the table until people organized around this demand. Suddenly all the U's protestations about the specter of homosexual rapists stalking the halls of the U of M disappeared into the dustbin of history, and our proposal was accepted. Clearly, victories won at the negotiating table are not entirely a question of how much time is spent haggling there.

Our bargaining team has learned through experience that well worked-out arguments and sophisticated maneuvers at the table are not the key to winning a good contract. It became clear that the objections presented by the U were not real ones, and that the Administration was simply not ready to concede anything on these issues.

The august assembly gathered around the table is not a community of scholars where the most sophisticated and logical argument wins the day. We answer the U's objections and they simply think up others - unless in the meantime a show of force has compelled them to capitulate.

WHAT HAPPENS AT THE TABLE?

The bargaining table is the scene of a war of nerves. One of the tasks of the bargaining team is to undergo and resist a rather grueling battle of wits. Some of the University negotiators are trained professional bargainers, who specialize in psychological warfare.

It is their task to convince our bargaining team that various of our positions are impossible to win; it is their task to demoralize us. It is their task to try to frighten us into giving up on our positions and falling back in hopes of getting us to accept less than we wanted. It is *our* job to keep from being brainwashed.

Perhaps the most classic weapon in the professional negotiator's bag of tricks is the threat of cutting off negotiations—frequently alternated with feints designed to create campus-wide feeling that agreement is just around the corner, so that we relax our efforts. We've all frequently fallen prey to this one.

The ebb and flow of spirits, from the RC to the picket line, has been a response, tide-like, to the U's position in its orbit around the gamut of psychological warfare tactics. We've tended to assume that it's always a bad sign whenever the two teams aren't face-to-face across the table.

The fallacy of this view can be illustrated by contrasting some of the Uni-

versity's verbal *threats* with their actual *actions*. For example, during the second week of strike, the Administration's team threatened us constantly with a Sunday night deadline.

On that Sunday, when their chief negotiator told us not to negotiate again until we were ready to do as he told, we called his bluff and walked out of negotiations. Our leaving was, in effect, a display of confidence in our strength. It turned the pressure of a deadline back on their team and communicated to them that we would not capitulate according to their whim.

It was a positive move on our part *not* to be bargaining during those hours: as a result of it, their team changed its "mind" and negotiated with us on every day of the week in which they had said they would not negotiate.

When the pressure generated on the picket lines is sufficient to move the U to bargain, they will. There is nothing magic about being at the table, and it is sometimes to our advantage not to be there.

PERSPECTIVES FOR THE FUTURE

In future, we must not get caught up in the fetishism of bargaining. In keeping with the relative importance of bargaining v. action outside, we must in future give more of our energies to organizing ourselves, educating ourselves, formulating positions for discussions of contract issues, of where our strength lies, of our position with regard to other fights for goals similar to ours across the country, and so on.

Our strength lies in our membership; therefore the more educated and organized we are, the stronger we will be. The sexual preference issue is a clear illustration of this. Our first self-assessment was that we were too weak to win it.

But after mobilization and education, we gathered enough support inside and outside our union to force the U to give in. Constant discussion and organization by our entire membership will keep us strong now and also next year, when we will have to continue to pressure the U to *live up* to the promises made in the contract we win this year.

One element among many in our effort to further strengthen our union in future is particularly relevant to this leaflet. Often at stewards' and other meetings, the sentiment has been expressed that "the bargaining team must have room to bargain." While this is true, it is also true that sometimes it is better for the bargaining team to be mandated to not have so much room, to receive orders to hold firm.

If we want to win something, the bargaining team is actually in a much better position to win it if we have the clear backing of the membership to hold to a tough position. It often hurts the bargaining team to have too much room to move, for this is essentially a mandate to fall back.

In the event that the membership decides that a position is not worth fighting for, the bargaining team should be mandated to fall back. In the event that the membership really wants to win something and is willing to fight for it, it only hurts the team to have too much flexibility. We must be able to communicate the militance of the picket lines to the U in the bargaining room as well as outside. No matter how militant the strike, if our bargaining team has too much freedom to concede, the resulting contract will be weak. Conversely, a militant bargaining team coupled with a militant strike is the way to winning victory in any strike.



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The File is a publication by and for rank-and-file academic labor organizers, foregrounding struggles from below. In response to the depoliticization of academic labor and the stale orthodoxy of business unionism, our mission is to link academic labor organizing with broader struggles beyond the campus. The university is a key part of current systems of power that extend far beyond it. Academic systems hobble new generations with debt, reproduce violent racial caste systems, concoct weapons for the military industrial complex, and concentrate wealth in elite enclaves. We underline the potential for academic labor struggles to escape the narrow confines of the university and link with broader initiatives against austerity, structural racism, patriarchy, and the general violence of class society. We welcome reports, (coherent) theoretical interventions on the changing nature of academic labor, and ideas for the proper steps needed to go on the offensive and stay there.

'We had to take things into our own hands'

A discussion with Rutgers Rank-and-File Caucus

By JARROD SHANAHAN

Alexandra Adams and Lauren Barbato are members of two separate bargaining units of AAUP-AFT at Rutgers University—the “full-timer” unit, and the “PTL” (part-time lecturer) unit, respectively. Earlier this year, after a dramatic strike mobilization by the full-time unit, AAUP-AFT settled what its staffers called “revolutionary” contracts.

Adams and Barbato begged to differ. *File* editor Jarrod Shanahan recently sat down with this dynamic duo for a discussion of their experiences at Rutgers and their work founding the Rutgers Rank-and-File Caucus.

JS What is your position at Rutgers?

AA I'm a fourth-year teaching assistant (TA). I teach two classes per semester. I'm also a full-time researcher for my PhD. A typical workday for me is twelve to fourteen hours, between research and teaching, twelve months a year, seven days a week.

LB I was a TA for two years, and for the last two years I've been teaching the same classes as an adjunct. When I started teaching composition as a TA, we had two days of training and they threw us into a classroom to teach English 101.

AA You had training? Look at you! I had never taken a biology class. My MS and BS aren't in biology. On my first day of work they told me “You're gonna teach Molecular Biology. Here's a book. Go get 'em!”

LB Damn! So after graduating I got stuck in adjunct Hell. I'm still stuck in it! My first year as an adjunct, I was teaching three classes at Rutgers and two at Farleigh Dickinson. I should publicize it: that school was paying \$2,500 per course! But I figured it could cover my car payments. I was also teaching at a high school program through Rutgers, for extra money. A lot of people in my department teach five, six, even eight classes per semester across multiple schools.

A MISSED OPPORTUNITY

JS How did you come to organize in AAUP-UFT?

AA I began as the union rep for the Department of Biological Sciences. The way it's structured at Rutgers, teaching assistants, graduate assistants, and “full-time” and tenure-track faculty are all in the same bargaining unit, and part-time lecturers (PTLs), also known as adjuncts, are in a different unit. During contract negotiations for my unit, the former, they were hiring organizers to mobilize for a strike. Most of us thought this was a very real thing, so we took the organizing bit very seriously. As a field organizer I got people to sign up for the union if they weren't already a member, and to sign a pledge card to go on strike. Meanwhile, as a grad worker, I was making less than \$26,000 a year, which had not increased since 2014, and we were working on a contract that had already expired fourteen months prior.

LB I was hearing about strike mobilizations from my roommate, who's a grad organizer in Alex's unit, and I went to their protests. PTL leadership wasn't really updating us. I became a member organizer for the PTL union and did some recruitment. But their emphasis was not on doing job actions. I was doing a lot of protests with the other unit, but none of it was coming from the PTL side.

JS And then the contract campaign kicked into high gear.

LB Things were getting really chaotic by mid-to-late March. We were sent a “job action survey,” ranging from whether we'd hand out flyers or strike indefinitely, with options for a one-day strike, two-day strike, etc. They never released results or called a strike authorization vote. It was confusing because the full-time unit held a strike authorization vote, and it passed by roughly 88%. Someone on



Lauren Barbato, with her students, during AAUP-AFT's pre-strike mobilization. When leadership sold out grad students and adjuncts, she shifted her energy to building a rank-and-file alternative.

Rutgers staff was telling adjuncts in my department we'd be fired if we went on strike. The union president was telling us we should strike and picket alongside the full-timers.

JS How did this mobilization shake out?

AA We were told by the union that they would call for a strike if the administration wanted to settle for anything less than ~\$30,000 per year for grad students in the first year of the contract. On April 17, the bargaining team settled on a contract where grads would get a \$1,000 retroactive increase for year 1, to bring us just under \$27,000—significantly less than what we were fighting for—and at the end of the four-year contract, we'd be making just above \$30,000. Then they mass-emailed everyone in the union about this “revolutionary contract” they had just won.

JS Do you think the strike was a bluff?

LB It was clear there was no intention of striking.

AA Most other organizers I spoke to believe it absolutely was.

JS Do you think a real strike would have won a better contract?

LB A real strike would win a better contract for adjuncts and grads, not just full-time faculty. Real gains for adjuncts can't be won at the bargaining table; they can only be won by striking!

AA Yes. A million times, yes.

JS But of course that didn't happen. How did the resolution of the full-timer contract impact your view of AAUP-UFT?

LB When they settled the contract for everybody but the adjuncts, we were angry and depressed. A lot of people were telling me they didn't want to go to work. I remember my students saying “You're not going on strike, you got a raise!” I was like “I didn't get a raise.” Adjuncts continued working on an expired contract until the end of the semester. Our PTL leadership kept saying they were making progress but they weren't. I knew we weren't going to get anything. The leverage of the strike was gone.

AA When we were still bargaining with the full-time unit, there was the full expectation that adjuncts would stand in solidarity with the full-time unit. That was one of the asks.

LB “Strike alongside!”

AA But the night the contract was settled, without even having the full terms, full-time faculty were responding to questions about whether they would stand in solidarity with PTLs, they were like “oh we're not allowed to.” The day of. They knew they were never gonna do it.

LB Our leadership was promised that the full-time unit wouldn't settle without the adjuncts. And then that exact thing happened and the full-time unit said well we can't promise that, “it's a legal issue.” Our leadership was played by the full-time leadership, but also they didn't mobilize at all. They had no faith in us doing a job action or striking. We felt betrayed by the full-time faculty. They had promised solidarity, but once they settled their contract, the union's executive director Patrick Nowlan told them to stay out of it.

UNITED IN RAGE

JS How did you two link up and begin organizing together?

LB In our rage!

AA We were doing the same thing for effectively the same reason, but separately, and happened upon each other. The night the full-time union settled on our contract, I went absolutely fucking berserk on the internet on anyone who posted on any social media forum about how awesome the contract was. I was like: “Did you forget something? This is ‘revolutionary’? Did you forget someone? And if solidarity doesn't mean fuck all within the same bargaining unit, what's going to happen to PTLs? Because they don't even have a contract.” And Lauren was saying similar things with regard to the adjuncts.

LB I was pissed! I was reading in the media about this is “historic,” “revolutionary,” “a huge victory,” I said there's

no victory if adjuncts don't get anything.

JS Do you think the word “revolutionary” is used a little too loosely these days?

LB It was used for our PTL contract too!

JS Last I checked we're still living under capitalism.

LB And still making poverty wages!

JS So how did you transform this rage into organizing?

LB The day after the full-time unit settled, Amy, one of our caucus founders who I met recruiting new members together, emailed me and said “I agree with you, what should we do?” We made a Slack group. Simultaneously a union staff organizer emailed me saying “OK, we need to focus on the PTLs now.” I was tasked with organizing a protest at Newark and I became the Newark point person. In Rutgers politics, everything is about New Brunswick, the union treats Newark and Camden as afterthoughts. We get a lot less help.

AA That's when I got involved. I got a message asking if I'd like to be a part of the Slack group. The PTLs were trying to organize a “grade in,” but it was something that had been assigned to them by the union. One union staffer came to help us set up. No resources were offered aside from a union banner, and there was no planned media coverage. I said OK, let me help out. Ultimately I think that's how we came together... after everybody said “What are you doing here? You aren't even an adjunct.”

LB The grade-in was our first organizing experience together. That was May 1. We were creating our caucus without even realizing it.

AA We had sign-in sheets to get people's contact info, and began inviting people to the Slack group so we could all stay in touch.

LB At this point we realized the PTL leadership was not organizing, and they don't know how to organize. They weren't communicating with members. This whole time they were still saying they were making progress. We felt we had to take things into our own hands, and began working independently. Then

when they settled, and we saw that it was a shitty contract, we said OK what can we do? And that was a “no campaign.”

BUILDING FOR THE LONG-HAUL

JS How did the “no” campaign play out?

LB The campaign surprised leadership. They had no idea. We announced we were a caucus, and started a Facebook group, and then unveiled the “no” campaign less than two weeks later. As soon as the contract ratification ballot hit our emails, we responded with our first “no” email to members. We also surprised leadership by having a story in NJ media that morning that featured our caucus and criticized the contract. Our campaign was mostly remote: We released targeted emails to members, answered questions on social media, created factual tweets and graphics to spread the word, and held Zoom calls for members. Leadership was not very active answering people's questions, so I'd go on Facebook and Twitter and answer questions. Several other media outlets also covered our campaign, and we're glad to have had help from 7k or Strike and the new rank-and-file coalition at Stony Brook University, too!

AA In total, despite only having such a short period of time, 1/3 of all the people who voted on the contract voted no.

JS How else have you been handling outreach?

LB We don't have access to the union's communication resources, and that's where leadership has the upper hand.

AA It's been whard to put our list together. There isn't a Rutgers database of adjuncts. There are at least four different titles that apply to what we call “part-time lecturers.” So we started going department by department. We relied on people going through their own departments and identifying adjuncts they know. We've been trying to stay active through different forums. Our Twitter is super active, we have a Facebook group, an Instagram, and a website. Meanwhile we're trying to build a more comprehensive email database.

JS What kind of crew did this organizing pull together?

LB We have our core organizers and a Facebook group with at least ninety members. We also have a slate in the union election. After the contract, we turned to elections, which Alex and I were

torn about.

AA There were a lot of things we were doing, like working with the 7K or Strike organizers at CUNY. A lot of what our caucus did strongly is outreach, and linking up with other people who were part of the same movement. We were concerned about putting too much time and effort into elections rather than the things we actually stood for.

LB In doing rank-and-file organizing, do I want to be part of the e-board, or running for president? I don't want to model the same neoliberal policies that have done nothing for the rank-and-file. If we do win, it will be a kind of radical insurgency. One of our organizers calls us an “activist slate,” and that's true. We're not just focused on the contract. We have three years before we start bargaining for the next one. So it has to be all about mobilizing, but mobilizing about other issues. Rutgers is going to raise student tuition 3%, and that's something we need to take a stance on, and mobilize along with students. We should also mobilize around issues like Black Lives Matter, immigration, reproductive rights, and building our communities. We can't just be all about the money. At the end of the day we all want a living wage. It's important, but it's not the whole thing.

Part-time leadership was played by the full-time leadership, but also they didn't mobilize at all.