Frequently Asked Questions about Graduate Student Organization

The actual "free and robust debate" isn't happening in an FAQ document — it's happening every day in our conversations with each other! This semester, hundreds of graduate workers have been sharing our experiences with each other and deciding together how we want to represent ourselves!

1. What is a union?

A union is workers coming together to demand a seat at the table and a say in our working conditions. WE are the union!

A union is an association of workers formed to negotiate with their employer with respect to the terms and conditions of their work, including wages, benefits, and other work-related issues. Union representatives negotiate with employers through a process called collective bargaining, and both parties are bound by the terms of the resulting contract.

2. What are authorization cards, and why do unions collect them?

Authorization cards are signed, written declarations submitted by members of a potential bargaining unit stating that they want a particular union to be their exclusive representative for the purposes of negotiating the terms and conditions of their employment with their employer. Typically, unions collect authorization cards as part of an organizing drive — that is, an attempt to show that there is an interest in unionizing and a desire to have the union serve as the exclusive bargaining agent.

3. What can a union do with the cards it collects?

We, grad workers at Yale,

A union could present the cards as proof of support for the union and request that the university voluntarily recognize the union as graduate students' exclusive bargaining agent through a “card check” (i.e., in the absence of a secret-ballot election). A union also could submit the cards in support of a petition for a representation election to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) in order to hold a secret-ballot election to determine if employees wish to be represented by a union for purposes of negotiating and establishing the terms and conditions of employment with their employer and, if so, by which union.

Employers can agree to recognize a union and begin negotiating a contract if a majority of employees demonstrate their support for a union. Microsoft recently agreed to a card check. At Brown, the university administration also voluntarily recognized a graduate worker union. Workers usually petition for an NLRB election when an employer has refused to voluntarily recognize a union through another democratic process like a card check.

We, grad workers at Yale,

A union isn't a service or an outside entity. Local 33 is organized and made up of grad workers at Yale!
4. Once a student has signed a card, can they take it back?

Under federal law, a union has no legal obligation to return an authorization card once it has been signed and submitted. Moreover, an individual cannot effectively revoke a card once they have signed it, as the NLRB follows a policy that any changes in employee support for unionization during a card campaign should be resolved in an election.

5. What would happen if there was an election?

An election would likely take place within a month after the regional director of the NLRB directs it. NLRB representatives would conduct and supervise all aspects of a secret-ballot election. Voting would likely take place at one or more easily accessible locations on campus on a specified day, during specified hours. The outcome of any election would be decided by a simple majority of votes cast. For example, if only 100 out of 500 eligible students vote, 51 voters would determine the outcome for all 500 students in the bargaining unit, as well as future students. The NLRB has adopted the principle that voters who do not participate in a democratic election assent to the will of the majority of those voting.

This is the principle of most elections, not a strange feature of the NLRB. Kind of weird for Yale to try and scare us about a basic electoral process...

6. If a graduate student signed an authorization card, would they be required to vote in favor of the union?

No. Signing an authorization card means that the graduate student supported the union's request to hold a secret-ballot election administered by the NLRB. Once the NLRB orders a secret-ballot election, each eligible voter is free to vote for or against unionization.

Actually, unless Yale specifically agrees to be neutral, the NLRB *can't* prevent the administration from running an anti-union campaign, trying to influence our decision, or scaring us into voting no - talk about pressure and coercion! Yale has hired anti-union law firm Proskauer Rose in the past to bust grad worker unionization efforts...wonder if they had a hand in this FAQ too?

7. How does the election process protect students?

An NLRB election would permit graduate students to cast their ballots in secret, exercising their free choice in an environment without pressure or coercion. The election would be conducted according to well-established rules that regulate the conduct of both Yale University and the union. The NLRB would decide who is eligible to vote, modify or approve the scope of the potential bargaining unit proposed by union, and any other issues that affect the election.

Employers (including Yale) can also propose who they think should be in a bargaining unit and eligible to vote.
8. If there were an election, how important is student turnout?

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9. How would having a union impact contracts for graduate students?

Collective bargaining is a process by which the union would negotiate with Yale University the terms and conditions of employment for all students in the bargaining unit. The agreement between the parties would be spelled out in a written document called a collective bargaining agreement or labor contract.

A collectively negotiated agreement in writing about our working conditions, pay, and benefits...sounds pretty good! As union members, we would determine priorities for our contract and any tentative contract would have to be ratified in a vote open to all members of the union.

How do you spell pay that keeps up with the rising cost of living; better access to mental health, dental, and specialist health care; protections for international student workers; and real recourse in situations of abuse, discrimination, or harassment? U-N-I-O-N-A-N-D-A-C-O-N-T-R-A-C-T.

10. How long would negotiations take?

There is no mandated timetable for bargaining. Some contract negotiations are straightforward and relatively brief. In other cases, contract negotiations are contentious or involve numerous issues that are not easily resolved. In these instances, it can take many months or even years to reach a contract. First contracts usually take longer to reach than subsequent contracts. For example, at the University of California, Berkeley negotiations on a first contract took more than seven years to complete.

Interesting to leave out that these negotiations at UC Berkeley were in the 1980s and they were establishing one of the first graduate worker contracts in the country. Grad workers at Berkeley have had a union and contracts for 30+ years.* And our peers at Harvard, Columbia, and Brown all recently negotiated contracts with historic improvements to pay and benefits!

11. How often would bargaining occur?

It would depend on the length of each contract, which would be an issue for negotiation at the bargaining table. The parties are obligated to negotiate a new contract only at the expiration of the previous contract.

It is standard to begin negotiating before a contract expires. Yale does this routinely with Locals 34 & 35, and has enjoyed 20 years of labor peace with our sister unions on campus. There's no reason this couldn't be true for grad workers and Local 33 as well.

12. Would all members of the bargaining unit have to join the union?

Regardless of the union membership status of individuals, a union would represent every person in the bargaining unit. Under federal law, if provided for in a collective bargaining agreement, a union can compel members of a bargaining unit either to become dues-paying union members or to pay the union an agency or representation fee (typically a similar amount to dues). Sometimes dues are a flat annual rate, while other times they are a percentage of wages. The union also could require bargaining unit members to pay initiation fees. Failure to pay dues could result in dismissal from a teaching or research appointment.

Unions collect dues so they can effectively support their members. Like any organization, a union takes work & money to run. Dues/fees amounts and increases have to be voted on by the entire union membership, and no dues are collected until there's a contract. At Harvard, union dues are 1.44% of gross pay for teaching and research (no dues are owed on financial aid or when not working). At Columbia, PhD grad workers will make a minimum of $44.4K this academic year even after dues are deducted.

13. Could Yale University make exceptions to provisions in the contract to accommodate the circumstances and needs of individual graduate students?

No, unless such exceptions were provided for in the contract or otherwise agreed to by the union. For example, if an individual graduate student wanted to teach in a particular semester in order to schedule around a research opportunity but was not in line to teach that semester, under the contract's system for determining teaching assignments, the department might not be able to accommodate that student's request.

Looks like someone forgot to mention that as it stands now, our teaching or research assignments can be changed at any time with no say or meaningful recourse.

Funny to leave out that unions can provide independent grievance procedures for resolving workplace issues and to address mistreatment and discrimination. They also provide a right to representation so you don't have to resolve problems alone! Unions protect workers, not police them. As union members, we would decide for ourselves if we wanted to make use of union processes or representation to address issues we might face.
14. Would unionization affect the role of the student government?

Currently, Yale University consults the Graduate Student Assembly (GSA) and the Graduate and Professional Student Senate (GPSS) on a wide range of matters affecting graduate students. If teaching and research assistants were to unionize, the union would be their exclusive representative regarding wages, hours, and other terms and conditions of employment. It would be unlawful for Yale University to deal with the GSA or the GPSS as a representative of graduate student teachers on most matters relating to their appointments, including amounts received for teaching and health insurance. Also, in some circumstances, federal law would prohibit the university from setting up advisory committees with graduate student members without union consent.

Last year, the GSA voted by a huge margin to support the campaign for a grad workers union. Many grad workers that serve on GSA and GPSS are also involved in organizing with Local 33. Graduate workers are saying — and showing — that a grad worker union can work alongside GSA and GPSS. So why does Yale want to convince us that it can't?

Graduate student workers at Harvard have a recognized union AND a student government. The same is true at Columbia, Brown, and the list goes on...* A union would not replace other forms of student representation or organization that currently exist at Yale.

15. Could Yale University increase funding while bargaining with the union over a contract?

Under the law, Yale University would not be permitted to make any unilateral changes in terms or conditions affecting students in the bargaining unit while negotiating a contract.

MIT tried this same tactic just last year, claiming the union would stop grad workers from getting raises.** All we would have to do is agree to let the raises go into effect. Why is Yale making it all seem so complicated?

*www.hgc.harvard.edu; www.gsas.columbia.edu/content/graduate-student-government; https://sites.brown.edu/gsc/
**https://mitgsu.org/updates/mitgsu-ue-calls-on-mit-admin-to-implement-gscs-raise-recommendations
16. What should I do if I feel intimidated by anyone during this process?

While union organizing is permitted on campus, all students have the right to feel safe and free from intimidation on campus. To the extent individuals are in areas to which they do not otherwise have access and that are restricted for safety reasons (such as labs), you can ask them to leave. You also have the right to share your experience with other students or anyone else. If you believe a Graduate School student has violated university policies, you may contact Associate Dean Allegra di Bonaventura (allegra.dibonaventura@yale.edu). If you have concerns about discrimination or harassment, you can contact one of the university’s Discrimination and Harassment Resource Coordinators. And you can contact public safety if you ever feel unsafe.

Encouraging us to call security or the Yale Police on our coworkers? This is an aggressive and hostile message. For many in our campus community, interactions with the police entail real risk.

What we'd really like to know is:

Why is the Yale administration so scared of grad workers having independent grievance procedures and the protections of a union to address issues of discrimination and harassment?

What is the Yale administration prepared to do to protect us from anti-union intimidation or retaliation?

When is the Yale administration going to publicly commit to being neutral on the question of grad worker unionization?

For more info & to sign your union card: www.local33.org