

NEWS

Why are graduate students unionizing in Worcester, and across the U.S.?

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WORCESTER — After filing its union recognition paperwork with Worcester Polytechnic Institute administrators, as well as the National Labor Relations Board in Hartford, the WPI Graduate Worker Union will vote in the coming months on whether or not to unionize.

But the WPI group was not the first to organize, and it likely won't be the last as unionization efforts, including those at universities, have been growing around the country.

"A whole new generation, maybe two generations, has come up since the Great Recession, where people who are younger are now understanding the value of unionization, where in prior decades it was not seen as much," said William Herbert, executive director of the National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education Professions at Hunter College in New York City.

In a report, "Graduate Student Employee Unionization in the Second Gilded Age," Herbert wrote that the number of graduate assistants in certified or recognized bargaining units in the United States grew by 35% between 2012 and 2019, from 62,656 to 83,050. The report found that the growth was "substantially" greater than past periods of unionization.

The report found that there were 17 newly certified or recognized bargaining units during that period. Of those, 11 were at private institutions, where 15,602, or 74.3%, of the newly represented graduate student assistants were based.

More than half of the increase came from units at Harvard University, with 5,050; and Columbia University with 4,256, the report said.

Clark University Graduate Workers United, which formed earlier this year, is made up of nearly 100 members, while WPI's has between 500 and 600.

"Over the past decade, when graduate assistants were given the opportunity to vote for unionization ... (it) by and large in overwhelming numbers has been in favor of unionization," Herbert said.

Efforts by graduate students to unionize have been going on for half a century, he said, with various rates of growth.

They are mainly driven by economics, as well as by some type of social movement. The first graduate worker union formed at the University of Wisconsin at Madison amid the anti-Vietnam War protests of the 1970s, Herbert said.

Graduate students of today, he said, have not only had to deal with the economic fallout of the Great Recession and the COVID-19 pandemic, but major social movements like #MeToo and Black Lives Matter.

Herbert said the National Labor Relations Board has at times acted as an obstacle to graduate worker unionization efforts.

Made up of five members nominated by the president and confirmed by the Senate, the composition of the board has led to different interpretations of the National Labor Relations Act.

The act guarantees the right of private-sector employees to organize unions, bargain or strike, and the board determines whether to apply it broadly or narrowly, he said.

The NLRB has flip-flopped several times on whether it views graduate assistants as university employees, Herbert's report said.

In 1974, the board ruled that Stanford University research assistants did not have the right to unionize because they were primarily doctoral students and not employees.

In 2000, the NLRB, mainly made up of board members appointed by Democratic President Bill Clinton, ruled that New York University graduate assistants had the right to organize a union.

However, by 2004, the NLRB, then controlled by board members appointed by Republican President George W. Bush, had deemed Brown University graduate assistants as students, rather than employees, leading to a decline in formal representation efforts, Herbert's report said.

When the NLRB overturned its Brown decision in 2016, after an effort by graduate students at Columbia University and the New School, "the pent-up demand for unionization then started to roll out and efforts began to use the National Labor Relations Act to get representation," Herbert said.

In 2015, Harvard University graduate workers began an effort to unionize. By 2018, the group had successfully voted to form a union, working with United Auto Workers 5118.

The UAW has since grown to represent tens of thousands of graduate student workers, including those at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and WPI, as well as hundreds of thousands of academic workers.

Herbert said industrial unions such as the UAW, have been popular partners for graduate assistants because they have more experience dealing with the private labor sector, and more specifically issues involving the National Labor Relations Act and the NLRB.

"UAW has a long track record representing workers on campus, and not necessarily educational workers, but others who there's sometimes a greater degree of affinity between graduate assistants and more blue collar kind of jobs," Herbert said.

Clark graduate workers are represented by Teamsters Local 170.

Although unionization efforts somewhat slowed during the pandemic, Herbert said COVID-related economic issues are driving interest and support again on campuses.

Sabine Hahn, a doctorate student at WPI who helped begin laying the groundwork for a union in 2020, said she became motivated during the pandemic after finding out that health coverage had been downgraded.

"Having a union gives us a voice to prioritize the changes on campus," Hahn said. "With a contract, we'd know the changes years in advance."

At Clark, after realizing their health care premiums had increased but their wages had not during the 2021 school year, graduate workers successfully petitioned the university to agree to subsidize 50% of their premium costs for the current school year.

At both Clark and WPI, graduate assistants expressed a desire for higher wages, as well as full health care coverage including coverage for dependents and other family members, as well as vision and dental.

One of the members who would benefit the most from these changes would be Helin Ünal, a Clark doctorate student, union member and new mother.

Born in Turkey, Ünal moved to the United States nearly a decade ago to attend UMass Amherst. After completing her master's at a school in Belfast, Northern Ireland, she returned to Massachusetts to pursue her doctorate degree at Clark.

Now in her fourth year at Clark, but her first year as a mother to a three-and-a-half-month-old son, Ünal and her partner — a doctorate graduate worker at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and member of the union — are still learning how to juggle parenting with work and academic responsibilities.

"We're trying to take care of our son together. A few days we share, but he's so young, it's not easy to stick to a schedule. It's always changing," she said. "We don't get child care support and that's a huge issue for us."

She said that while the university typically provides six weeks of parental leave, since her son was born in the summer, she was not eligible for leave.

"We don't get stipends during the summer. We don't have summer funding, so it's another issue," she said. "If I had my baby during the semester, I could have used that six weeks."

She said that although they may not be working as a teaching assistant or research assistant, graduate employees still have academic work to complete, such as collaborating with other researchers.

The one thing UMass provides that Clark does not, she said, is health coverage for their son. If it were not for that benefit, she said, it would be unlikely that both of them would be able to continue working on their doctorate degrees.

However, due to the high cost of living in Worcester, Ünal and her partner live in Northampton, which means that the days that she has to be on campus requires an hour and a half drive each way.

“Last semester, when I was pregnant, I had to drive at least two to three days a week,” she said. “This semester, since I have a very young baby, my department was very supportive and they worked with my schedule, so if I need to go, it's once a week.”

While she appreciates her department's flexibility and feels lucky, Ünal said it should not be, “about luck. It should be about rights.”

Jake Scarponi, a doctorate student and union organizer, said graduate workers are in the "same boat" as Clark union members, looking to get similar benefits.

"This is a full-time job, everybody understands that, but we're not paid very well," he said. "We want to have direct input into how much we're paying, what our health insurance plan is. We think it also opens up some good avenues in terms of workplace harassment."

He said having the group collectively at the table with administration when issues come up will allow them to help resolve workplace harassment.

Peter VanNostrand, a doctorate student at WPI and a union organizer, said the impact of low wages and increased cost of living in Worcester has made it difficult to pay rent and medical bills, as well as travel home to visit family.

VanNostrand, who was drawn into the union by Hahn, said it will not only potentially lead to better pay, health care and workplace protection for graduate workers, but ensure international students are "treated fairly," and won't have trouble with their visas or unfair fees.

Herbert said that, when it comes to meeting union demands such as an increase in wages, the money comes from funds already in the university's budget and the size of the increase depends on the size of the current budget.

"A common factual issue discussed in collective negotiations is the employer's ability to pay for increased wages and benefits," he said. "I am unaware of any institution that had to tap into its endowment to cover the costs of a negotiated agreement."

He also said that he isn't aware of any research that links increased wages and benefits to increased tuition at universities.

"In many institutions, the institution is raising money through alumni, and have resources that don't require increases in tuition," Herbert said. "One of the things would be examining the budget and how much and what kind of money they have, in terms of their foundation and fundraising to provide for greater benefits, for salaries, but also to ensure that tuition costs don't go up."

Clark union members have had several bargaining sessions with the university, being presented an economic and benefits proposal in August that the group found insufficient.

The group recently voted to authorize a strike earlier in September to signal to the university that they have the power to go on strike at anytime, although they are waiting to see how the university responds before deciding to go on strike.

On Monday, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Graduate Student Union, which is made up of about 4,000 represented by United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America, filed a petition with the NLRB to also represent 1,000 graduate fellows at the university.

The NLRB said union election union petitions for all unions increased by 57% between October 2021 and March 2022. That is up from the first half of Fiscal Year 2021 where the number of union petitions increased from 748 to 1,174.

While the NLRB could become less receptive to these efforts if a Republican is elected president in 2024, “There’s no broad brush here,” Herbert said.

An example he provided was when a board appointed by the Trump administration had proposed new regulations that would have reversed the Columbia decision.

He, as well as many others, submitted comments to the NLRB urging them to take a position.

“The NLRB chose to withdraw that proposed rule which suggested that maybe they were not as keen about reversing Columbia at least through regulation,” Herbert said.

He also said that, even if the decision had been reversed, contracts already agreed upon between the university and union would still be in place until they expired.

Universities could choose not to engage in contract negotiations again, such as at NYU, but there are also universities that have been “understanding” of unionization.

“There have always been higher education institutions that have been respectful to unionization and collective bargaining,” Herbert said. “There have been others that have used their mighty resources to spend a lot of money in what's known as union avoidance campaigns.”