

The Scarlet & Black

UGSDW wins expansion election, will expand to all hourly student workers

[Ellianna Cierpiot](#) · April 26, 2022



The Union of Grinnell Student Dining Workers won their expansion election and will expand to represent all hourly student workers on campus. Photo by Maddi Shinall.

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Grinnell College will become the first ever fully unionized undergraduate school in the United States, with every hourly student worker being represented by the Union of Grinnell Student Dining Workers (UGSDW), after a historic win today in an election for expansion.

The UGSDW won the expansion vote by 321 votes, with 327 voting to expand, and only 6 voting against. Ballots were initially scheduled to be counted on Thursday, April 21; however, a [toxic sewage gas leak](#) at the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) Region 18 regional office in Minneapolis that received the ballots caused a delay in the counting.

“This is the culmination of five years of organizing,” UGSDW president Keir Hichens ’22.5 said. “[It’s] just a huge sense of accomplishment and excitement for what’s to come, because this is the first step in a longer process of winning the things that student workers need ... a first step that has been a long time coming.”

The NLRB livestreamed the Tuesday, April 26 ballot count from a mail-in election held from April 1 to April 20.

“Watching the numbers go up... It hasn’t settled in what that means, but I’m sure that will happen over the next few days,” Advisor to the Board, Sofia Carr ’22 said. “But it is really beautiful to see all these yeses of people and co-workers or friends or peers that we’ve been doing this for. It’s all very, very exciting.”

Hichens described the expansion as a result of student organizing.

“It’s important to underscore that ... the College’s interests and employees interests are opposed. And so we are ... ready to fight and win for what student workers need,” he said. “At the end of the day in the event they don’t give student workers what we need we’re ready to take action.”

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College President Anne Harris wrote in an email to the S&B that she respected the union’s advocacy and collaboration.

“I am very proud of the working relationship between myself, Chair of the Board of Trustees Michael Kahn and union leadership that we all committed to and developed over the eight sessions of negotiations,” Harris wrote. “We began from a place of shared values (an equitable employment experience for students at Grinnell) and accepted and respected that we all might have different paths to fulfilling that value.”



UGSDW President Keir Hichens `22.5 addressing UGSDW members at a meeting on Mar. 3. Photo by Maddi Shinall.

In October 2021, the union took steps with [mailroom workers](#) to partially expand and organize, which UGSDW Secretary-Treasurer Lu Johnston was involved in.

“For me, especially in the mailroom, it’s [the union is] a way to ensure that no other student has to go through what I did there and what I saw other students going through ... because every student deserves to feel safe and comfortable at their job,” Johnston said. “And so with the union, we can make that happen, and we don’t have to fight as hard there.”

It’s still going to be a fight, though, Johnston and other UGSDW members said, because this expansion paves the way for the union’s next step: contract bargaining.

“Our fight for higher wages, better working conditions and strong protections for workers begins and ends with our collective action as workers, so having a seat at the bargaining table is a key part in the process of winning protections for workers,” Hichens said.

“The biggest thing is that student workers will be bargaining for themselves. We will have representatives from each workplace ... and it’s going to be a democratic process of picking who gets to bargain ... every worker from every workplace will have the opportunity to give input on what we’re bargaining.”

Vice President of Human Resources, Jana Grimes, commented on the upcoming bargaining process, citing section 7B of the [neutrality agreement](#) that the College and UGSDW signed in March.

“I look forward to the continued collaboration in building upon the positive groundwork which has already been established in the neutrality agreement. The next step, as outlined in Section 7B of the neutrality agreement, requires that each representative of the Union and the College who intends to engage in a formal bargaining session to first attend negotiation training prior to beginning the collective bargaining process,” Grimes wrote in an email to the S&B.

Harris also said she anticipated the upcoming bargaining.

“We have important, complex, and sure-to-be difficult conversations ahead – but they are all those things because they are worthwhile and they matter,” Harris said.

Although current Dining Services employees were not eligible to vote on expansion, their bargaining period could re-open.

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Nora Kohnhorst '25, UGSDW executive board member at large, said that she looks forward to seeing the union expand past dining workers.

“As a dining worker, it’s super exciting to see that some of the same benefits that I enjoy are going to be extended to other workplaces,” Kohnhorst said. “It’s really exciting to see all these different students from workplaces across campus rallying together for a common cause.”

A first year, Kohnhorst was not on campus for the first expansion fight in 2018 but said hearing about it had pushed her to be more active in the union.

UGSDW’s initial attempt for expansion was unsuccessful when the College Board of Trustees contested it. This current expansion fight was partially facilitated by the neutrality agreement signed by both the UGSDW and the Board of Trustees that said the College would not challenge or delay the expansion vote.



UGSDW members celebrating as the NLRB announced the election results. Photo by Maddi Shinall.

“This would be one of the first, if not the first, wall to wall undergraduate bargaining unit at a higher education institution,” William Herbert, labor lawyer and executive director of National Center for Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions, said.” It is also significant because UGSDW is a DIY union, like the Amazon labor union that successfully [organized workers on Staten Island](#).”

The historic win also comes in the context of undergraduate labor movements at other schools like [Dartmouth](#) and [Wesleyan](#), and Kenyon College, which is participating in an [indefinite strike](#) for student workers’ rights.

“As we are prepared to fight and win for what we need on our campus we’re also building this militant labor movement across the entire country that will fight for working people everywhere,” Hichens said. “So, yeah, excited about what this means for us, but also the precedent that it sets for the entire country.”

Editor’s note: Keir Hichens is the podcast editor for the S&B. Hichens was not involved in the writing or editing of this article.



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