

Fight to Win: The Political Contours of Graduate Student Organizing

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This piece maps some of the political contours of graduate student organizing in the university setting. Drawing from my experiences of organizing (labour union-related or otherwise) at York University in Toronto and later Concordia University in Montreal, this piece reflects on what I've learned from other organizers and theorists to gesture towards some of the common issues on organizing graduate students. This will be in part autobiographical as I compare my experiences of organizing (labour or otherwise) alongside my experiences of labour studies in the academy. To wit, I'll use the organizing at University of Toronto in Summer 2016 as a site of exploration of the tensions between graduate union mobilization, and the difficulties of building solidarity for labour and other struggles outside of the classroom, either on or off campus. I'll end with gesturing towards the larger issues on the horizon for unionized graduate labour.

Organized Labour in the Academy

To begin, what to say about the status of labour in the academy? First, it varies by region: my analysis here will be on the North American context. Here in Canada, we have the immense privilege of having union labour as the general standard across higher education institutions. This is not the case in the United States, where the ability to unionize varies by institution, with graduate students private universities recently losing the right to unionize as of September 2019.

Unionized labour in Canada is also distinct from the United States in terms of its strength. Writing for *Jacobin*, McGill sociology professor Barry Eidlin notes that while U.S. unionized labour relied heavily on legal arguments and political investments in the Democratic party, Canadian unions in the 20th century focused more on building class power. As Eidlin (2016) writes, "Canadian labor extracted its early legal victories from a hostile state. It was able to protect and build on those victories not because it had political friends in high places, but because it retained more of its independent strength as a class actor."

The Political Contours of Campus Organizing

As graduate students, our union organizing faces particular challenges due to our university workplace.

The role of steward or department delegate is one example of this. At a unionized workplace such as a factory or a hospital, a shop steward's role is more clear-cut: be the union contact person during a particular shift and/or floor, ensuring consistent union communication and representation. This model is grafted to the university sector, with its own peculiarities. Instead of shop stewards based on location (at York we called them stewards; at Concordia, we call them delegates), union reps are based on department. While departments make sense as spaces for discreet organizing, organizing representatives by programs may also be a productive possibility, as the divide between MA, PhD, and late PhD students is quite pronounced in terms of schedule and workload. Aside from this, what becomes more difficult is cross-campus collaboration and organization.

There are unique difficulties to the university labour sector. In a neoliberal university setting, our lives are more precarious and often contingent upon getting the next contract. Such work on a contract to contract basis not only puts stress on our membership, especially over the summer when jobs dry up, but such sporadic contracts and eventual graduation means a constantly changing membership that needs education and outreach. Other roadblocks to mobilization include our status as both students and workers. Reaching out to the membership is tricky if there are multiple campuses (like Concordia and York), or if members are away on fieldwork, among other academic requirements.

At the bargaining table, management is usually quick to divide between student life and work life of graduate students, but the reality is much more murky. At Concordia, the Faculty of Engineering is an excellent example where student status and academic labour co-mingle into tricky situations.

A common issue in Engineering is overwork, that is, graduate students working more hours than agreed upon in their contract and workload form. However, many engineering students find they are pressured to overwork because they fear a backlash from their supervisors, such as not being hired again for a particular course or research assistantship, or receiving less support for their own research. Adding to this fact, many of these engineering students are international students, and thus their tuition is deregulated while their work opportunities are limited (no more than 20 hours of work per week off campus, which we'll return to later). As such, it's difficult for these students to stand up for their right to say no to unpaid labour.

Engineers tend to be the least #woke about their labour rights, but in some ways easiest to organize because of neoliberal capitalism's investments in STEM (the disciplines of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) over the humanities. At Concordia, engineering graduate students get joint offices, with dozens of them filling up the EV building, which makes it easier for door to door mobilization. Door to door can be more difficult in other faculties due to less communal space. In my first year of PhD, one of my professors remarked how every PhD student got an office in his time. This is no longer the case in the humanities. There are communal spaces where PhD students sometimes gather, but they are few and far between. In short: capital's invested interests in STEM over the humanities makes it structurally easier to organize, but these are also the areas where we find the most exploitation by capital in response.

Outside of union labour, I have often found Graduate Student Associations (GSAs) to struggle with relevance. GSAs represent all graduate students, unionized or not, which ideally means you have a broad reach across campus for political organizing. In my experience with past GSAs at York and Concordia, these organizations have political potential, but ultimately lack the resources and people power that their undergraduate colleagues have (namely the Canadian Federation of Students [CFS], the largest student organization in Canada). Both GSAs, for instance, have a dental plan and a few other benefits, but they pale in comparison to CUPE 3903's unionized benefits hard fought over decades of bargaining. The GSA's representative positions on Senate and other important institutional councils however can be cultivated as important sites for political intervention, as it was during the CUPE 3903 strike through 2018.

Solidarity Forever?

In my final course for my MA in Cinema and Media Studies, I took a summer course on media labour, detailing the various forms of labour that goes into making film, music, and other forms of art. Half-way through the course, food service workers at University of Toronto began protests at changes made to their workplace instituted by the University of Toronto. By switching their food from an outside contractor (Aramark) to be inside the university, University of Toronto was instituting a number of changes: a 15% elimination of the workforce, the erasure of years of seniority in shifting to a new system, and the loss of preferred affiliation with UNITE HERE, forcible joining the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE Ontario framed this as “contracting in”). While I am quite fond of my former union, beyond the local level, it is composed of nearly impenetrable bureaucracy, where UNITE HERE, by contrast, is known for their grassroots organizing and empowering their workers. While CUPE’s involvement was relatively small, their lack of involvement was in some ways callous.

Galvanized by the protests (daily pickets on university grounds, actions during graduation, etc), I quickly made some handouts for my class. Speaking before class began as I gave everyone a handout of all the information, I made the pitch plainly: on the next Wednesday, a summer day when we don’t have class, let’s join the protest for 1-2 hours at U of T and support the workers. If we talk about the importance of social justice and labour rights in class, we should also be willing to engage in acts of solidarity outside the classroom. I hoped that at least a few members of my class would come to the solidarity picket.

No one did.

There are caveats here, of course. Obviously as graduate students, we have a lot of work we already have to do, and issues and recognition of capacity are valid. Perhaps if I had time to have one-on-one conversations with people, I might have had better success. But I must also admit that I was hurt by this failure to get anyone to come support workers in need, as it seemed a glaring contradiction: that we were moved by the stories of labour exploitation and precarity in the classroom, yet when presented with a tangible opportunity to support labour outside of the university, my colleagues failed to show.

By contrast, while my classmates from York and Ryerson failed to show, friend and member of CUPE 3902 (the union for contract academic workers—TAs, instructors, etc.—at University of Toronto) went on a hunger strike for a week alongside other UNITE HERE members. This individual, a woman of colour, put her body on the line in full solidarity, something I’ve rarely seen from those in the academy. The image of the labouring femme body is one that lingers throughout my union experience, as union labour has often divided itself across gendered lines.

The Work of Unions

During the “off year” (2016-2017) I served on the executive of CUPE 3903, the majority of executives were women. It was only when bargaining began in 2017 that a significant number of men came forward to do the work for the executive. The gender dynamics were clear: men will step in “when it matters,” while women can keep the union running during these off seasons.¹

Of course, our work was never mere maintenance. During my time as an executive, we were often stressed to the point of breaking down, and overwork and a toxic environment were common complaints throughout the year. But the reality is we always need people to help out, because as an organizer, you will never fully be at ease, because you are directly combatting a capitalist system that will do everything in its power to make you fail.

Political Science PhD Candidate and writer Alyssa Battistoni (2019) details these struggles in her powerful essay on her union organizing work with UNITE HERE at Yale University. While the fight to unionize at Yale’s fight is different than ours in terms of history and scope (there’s a decades long struggle to unionize the campus), Battistoni writes of the intense sacrifices she made as a key organizer in the mid 2010’s. The details she conjures —waking up with a pit in her stomach, crying in meetings,

stretching herself beyond her limit—were incredibly relatable to me. I, too, have cried in union meetings, and stretched myself to my limits at York. (I was a key organizer of May Day 2017 in Toronto, while also serving as a union executive, while *also* finishing my Master’s project.)

Linger in Battistoni’s masterful piece is a question: why do we do it? Why do we sacrifice so much of ourselves?

For myself, my entrance into labour politics was built on necessity: York University previously promised international tuition indexation for graduate students, a provision hard fought by the 2015 strike by CUPE 3903. Tuition indexation is a provision ensuring that any increase in tuition must be matched with an increase in funding. It’s important to note this isn’t a unique win by one union; similar language was won in arbitration by CUPE local 4600, which represents teaching assistants and contract faculty at Carleton University in Ottawa. This language is particularly important for international students. As of Fall 2019, international tuition is deregulated in Ontario and Quebec. Tuition indexation ensures international students are not priced out of accessible education. It was only after accepting York’s offer and moving to Canada that York took away promised funding, leaving international students like myself in a terrifying limbo. While I was already politicized before coming to York, the union’s success in combating York’s attempts at austerity was the only way forward in completing my degree. Like many others, I needed to fight in order to live.

So What Are We Fighting For?

To end this piece, I want to think ahead and chart the issues that are manifesting on the horizon.

First, as Eidlin (2016) and Battistoni (2019) write, labour cannot rely on legal arguments to support labour struggles. Under the Trump administration, unionizing in the United States is going to get a lot more difficult. The National Labour Relation Board (NLRB) is not your friend. As of September 2019, the NLRB has reversed its 2016 decision that gave the right to unionize to teaching and research assistants at private universities (Yaffe-Bellany 2019). Battistoni writes about the agonizing wait for the NLRB to give final certifications to their unionizing efforts, only for them to be washed away with the Trump administration.

In terms of organizing goals, the next step is to unionize post-doctoral fellowship positions. While teaching assistant unionization is largely standardized across Canada, post-doc unionization is not, despite these positions including teaching labour. Whether it be with teaching assistants or faculty associations, post-docs deserve unionized protections and gains.

The biggest issue, especially at Canadian universities, is the exploitation of international students. Canadian Universities in the 2000s by and large shifted towards exploitation of international student labour. Deregulation of international student tuition in Ontario and Quebec exploits international students (who will take any kind of work to make ends meet), while also making education accessible only to rich families. International students are also limited in the kinds of work they can pursue. While on-campus work is mostly free of hour restrictions, off-campus work is restricted to no more than 20 hours a week. This dichotomy—drastically increasing tuition, yet limited work opportunities to pay it — was thrown into sharp contrast in the summer of 2019, as international student Jobandeep Singh Sandhu was deported for “working too much.”

We see this issue manifest at Concordia both in copious overwork, particularly in Engineering, but also in the job of invigilation. Invigilation is the the biggest labour issue of graduate students right now at Concordia. These jobs pay poverty wages (minimum wage at time of writing), while the same work at other Montreal universities is paid significantly higher. The majority of invigilators are international students because of their precarious status in Canada, and they deserve better.

Concordia and McGill were the largest lobbyists at the provincial government to deregulate international tuition. As of this writing, it is unclear whether the CAQ government has put this legislation on hold out of their own racist self interest.

Unions fighting for international tuition indexation is one route to support international students. Additionally, at York, the cost of health care plans is paid for by York, another important safety net won through union bargaining.

As international tuition is a provincial issue, many unions turn to electoral politics as well. Your mileage may vary in terms of “Voting is Harm Reduction” (VIHR), but I would seriously question the political efficacy of electoral politics, at least as the only form of political participation. As David Camfield writes in *Briarpatch Magazine*, “VIHR wrongly assumes that in the lead-up to elections, all we can do is vote for the least-bad candidate or party. Instead of encouraging us to think about how we can take advantage of the election season to further our projects ... VIHR often sends the message that all we can do is settle for one of the options presented to us. This can lead to people doing things that are inconsistent with the commitments to radical change they espouse, like uncritically supporting NDP candidates or even voting Liberal” (2019). (“Is voting really ‘harm reduction?’”). To return to Eidlin (2016), success comes not from electoral politics, but class power.

Conclusion

To organize for labour is to sacrifice your labour for the good of others. It is a gamble on whether it will actually pay off. One of the so-called secrets from Labor Notes’ *Secrets of a Successful Organizer* is that “One hard reality about organizing: you’re going to fail a lot. You’ll lose more often than you win.” The challenge of organizing is daunting given we already feel overwhelmed pursuing graduate studies in the first place.

But the stakes for organizing could never be higher. Union erosion, neoliberal capitalism, the rise of the gig economy, and more, put pressure on younger generations to try and seek out a living, often at the cost of their livelihoods, particularly psychological health. But as Marx wrote, we have nothing to lose but our chains.

Notes

1. There is more to be said in terms of other areas of intersection identity and union participation, particularly race and LGBTQ+, but this exceeds this essay’s scope.

References

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