

# **US - NEW YORK - NYU Graduate Students on Strike: Explanations (nyuinc.org)**

Saturday 18 February 2006, by [John Malone](#)

*The Graduate Student Organizing Committee (GSOC) of Local 2110/UAW is a union for graduate students who work at NYU as teachers, researchers, and graduate assistants.*

In 2000, GSOC won an historic first contract that raised stipends 40%, provided healthcare and childcare benefits, and addressed important workplace rights for graduate employees. Now the NYU administration is attempting to dissolve the union, hiding behind a regressive legal decision made by the Bush-appointed Labor Board. But GSOC members and their supporters refused to let that happen. After a year of mobilizing - including a petition-drive, large rallies, and a non-violent civil disobedience action - they went on strike this fall 2005. The strike has ramifications beyond NYU, as GSOC was the first, and remains the only, grad student union at a private university, and the administration's anti-union campaign is part of a broader right-wing attack on the labor movement. A Grad/Undergrad Solidarity committee (GUS) was established last spring by undergraduates committed to supporting the GSOC contract campaign, and welcomes new members.

GSOC contact: 212-387-0220; [gsoc@2110uaw.org](mailto:gsoc@2110uaw.org);

[www.2110uaw.org](http://www.2110uaw.org)

GUS contact: [kmc297 at nyu.edu](mailto:kmc297@nyu.edu).

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## **What is a union?**

A union is a democratic organization of workers that uses the collective power of its members to win better working conditions, pay and benefits. Unions also help advocate on behalf of employees who feel they aren't being treated fairly or legally.

## **Why do workers join unions?**

Union workers earn more money: 26% more, according to the Department of Labor. For women, it's 31% more; for African-Americans, 29%; for Latinos, 53%. Unions help secure better health care and benefits, safety standards, and protection from arbitrary firing or discrimination; they also give workers a voice on the job, and some recourse if they are harassed or mistreated.

Why do employers dislike unions?

Unions restrict management's power by preventing them from arbitrarily firing people, paying poverty wages, denying reasonable benefits, or making workers do things not in their job descriptions.

## **What is GSOC?**

GSOC is the Graduate Student Organizing Committee, the union for Teaching and Research Assistants at NYU. Grad students democratically elected to form GSOC in 1999. GSOC's first contract was historic - it was the first contract for a grad union at a private university (there have been unions at public schools for

over 30 years). GSOC's first contract expired on August 31st and now NYU is refusing to negotiate a second contract.

Why do GSOC members want a second contract?

GSOC's first contract raised TAs' and RAs' stipends by an average of 40%. Before the contract, TA stipends in GSAS ranged from \$13,000 per year to as low as \$6000. Last year under the contract, the minimum stipend was \$18,000.

Before their contract, grad students had to pay the premiums on their health care. Because of the contract, health care is now fully covered. Although this year NYU has already started to raise health care costs for grads. They couldn't do this with a contract.

GSOC has improved working conditions for graduate employees, as only a union can. NYU wants to unilaterally determine the working conditions for grads. Graduate employees need a collective voice in matters pertaining to their work, which usually entails teaching undergrads.

### **Why won't NYU bargain with GSOC?**

In 2000, the NLRB (National Labor Relations Board) ruled unanimously that NYU must bargain with GSOC. In July 2004, the Bush-stacked labor board reversed their ruling in a partisan vote and said that NYU is not obligated to bargain with GSOC. Even though NYU is hiding behind this ruling as an excuse not to bargain, they are still free to negotiate with GSOC at any time.

NYU claims that TAs and RAs are students, not workers. Clearly they are both. Why are TAs at CUNY workers but not at NYU? Teaching is work, stipends are pay, and people who work for pay are workers.

GSOC has tried to bring NYU to the bargaining table by holding huge rallies and submitting a petition signed by the vast majority of its members. TAs and RAs are fighting for basic rights; the administration is trying to overturn their rights, at the expense of our education. Since NYU is refusing to bargain fairly and respect the rights of graduate workers, GSOC may be forced to strike to get a second contract. No one wants to strike, but no one wants to be mistreated either.

### **Why GSOC is good for undergrads?**

TAs' working conditions are our learning conditions. Without contractually guaranteed minimum stipends and health care, many NYU grad students are forced to work other jobs to make ends meet, which means less time for grading, teaching and office hours. GSOC's contract also mandated paid orientation and training for all TAs before they begin teaching - don't you want your TAs to be well-trained?

Our tuition is sky-high, but not because of GSOC. President Sexton's salary is about \$750,000, which puts grads' demands for health care and minimum raises in context. Where do you want your money going?

### **What can I do to help?**

- **Wear a purple button** to show your support for GSOC.

- **Join G.U.S.**, the Grad-Union-Solidarity group. Email [gsoc@2110uaw.org](mailto:gsoc@2110uaw.org) to join.

- **Email President Sexton** and tell him to negotiate with GSOC. [John.sexton@nyu.edu](mailto:John.sexton@nyu.edu) or (212) 998-2345. Have your parents do the same!

- **Support GSOC during the strike.** Don't cross picket lines, urge your professors to move classes off-campus, and join your TAs on the picket line!

### **RHETORIC VS. REALITY**

There's a really great strike archive online now with lots of documents and some links, you can find it

here. A grad student studying in Caracas is trying to be on “virtual strike” while there and he recently wrote a great piece breaking down NYU’s arguments. It’s modeled after NYU’s “rhetoric vs. reality” talking points on the provost website and it’s a good point-by-point response to NYU’s line.

*1. “By bringing “a number of challenges” through the union grievance procedure, GSOC-UAW has interfered in the internal academic decision-making of the university-for example, it has attempted to dictate who the university hires to teach recitation sections.”*

Over the entire 3-year contract, NYU has only cited two examples of “academic interference” in GSOC grievances. (More than one does, technically, make “a number.”) Both were filed in cases where NYU hired graduate students for TA work but classified them as “adjuncts,” who are paid much less than TAs and are excluded from union benefits. GSOC did not challenge who was hired, nor has course material ever been subject to any grievance. GSOC simply argued that teachers hired as TAs should be granted union pay and benefits available to other TAs. Both cases were resolved in NYU’s favor by an arbitrator agreed to by both parties. Still, GSOC offered in June to withdraw any grievance NYU found objectionable as a compromise offer. Despite claiming that these grievances were the only obstacles to a new contract, NYU refused the offer.

*2. “NYU made a contract offer to GSOC In August that would have allowed the union to represent GAs on economic issues, but barred the union from filing grievances that would interfere in academic issues. GSOC refused the offer, giving NYU no choice but to “move on.””*

NYU’s offer required GSOC to surrender rights to a grievance procedure with third-party arbitration. Besides being a vehicle for members to bring complaints to the employer, a grievance procedure is a way for both parties to enforce a labor contract with the aid of a neutral arbitrator who judges disputes. NYU’s offer proposed to do away with an arbitrator and give the Provost final authority to judge any disagreement. This would have given NYU unilateral authority to interpret the contract, rendering it meaningless as a mutually binding pact. In other words, NYU could have felt free to violate any contractual agreement on economic issues, and the union would have had no recourse to challenge the violation. When GSOC requested a meeting to discuss the proposal, NYU responded by announcing its refusal to recognize the union.

*3. “Graduate students do not need a workers’ union. They are NYU students, and student and university government can address their concerns.”*

Grad students are also employees who perform essential work for NYU. From teaching language courses to leading recitations, labs, and seminars, graduate students teach a large proportion of undergraduate classes. Unfortunately, history has shown that the university will take economic advantage of graduate teaching labor if it has the opportunity. Before our union, grad students earned as little as \$10,000/year and had no health insurance. Only a binding contract-which a student council, however well-intentioned, cannot negotiate-can ensure fair treatment and independent representation for undergraduates’ primary teachers.

*4. Graduate students earn a package of over \$50,000 per year. Why do they want a union too?*

We earn \$19,000/year in pay plus health benefits, which were only won by the union contract. NYU has derived the rest of this \$50,000 figure from tuition remission, which is standard in virtually all PhD programs in America. (NYU could raise our “tuition” to \$100,000, and then claim we make six figures!) Many TAs, furthermore, are no longer taking classes of any sort and therefore do not benefit from remission anyway.

*5. The union sought to deny financial benefits and protection to TAs who chose not to join the union, and NYU was unwilling to allow this.*

In making this claim, NYU is obliquely referring to its demand, issued in the August contract proposal, that GSOC become an “open shop” union. In US labor law, there are three kinds of union “shops”: the

“closed shop,” where all workers are required to join the union; the “open shop,” common in southern states, where membership is voluntary; and the “agency shop,” where workers may choose to join the union but must either pay union dues or an equivalent “agency fee.” In the agency shop, those choosing to opt out of the union are still, under federal law, entitled to union benefits and representation. NYU appears, therefore, to be claiming that GSOC demanded a closed shop. However, this is completely untrue; GSOC has always wanted only to maintain the status quo from its previous contract, when it was an agency shop. Every other union on the NYU campus has the same arrangement.

*6. The university has spent months in negotiations with GSOC, to no avail.*

This claim, made in President Sexton’s Nov. 14 letter to the NYU community, is simply false. NYU officials have never accepted GSOC’s numerous invitations over the last year to meet with our student bargaining committee. Furthermore, the university made clear that its “final proposal” in August was non-negotiable. Indeed, when the union contacted NYU officials with questions on the proposal, the university responded by breaking off all contact. GSOC’s sole demand remains negotiations for a new contract. This is all we have ever asked of the administration, and we remain prepared to bargain at any time.

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Source:

<http://nyuinc.org/gsoc/>