

Graduate Students Must Question Unionization

“So, are you going to sign a card?” The question, often asked in a low voice, can be heard in department hallways, TA offices, and even the Graduate Center Bar – anywhere Brown University’s graduate students meet to talk. The subject? Whether Brown’s graduate employees will support the unionization drive that is about to be kicked off on our campus by the United Auto Workers (UAW).

Depending upon when this column is printed, this information might cause some confusion – for there has been no general announcement of any such drive, and no reasoned public debate in recent weeks about the benefits and drawbacks of unionization at Brown. How did the question of unionization arise, and why haven’t we heard anything about this drive before now? Earlier this year, after a fairly heated debate broke out on the Brown graduate student email list between advocates and opponents of unionization, several of the proponents of unionization secretly decided to initiate a graduate employee union drive, and invited a national union to help them out. Professional union organizers from the UAW arrived on campus the week before spring break; as this column is written they are preparing to launch a card drive, the first step towards a legal vote on unionization.

I am not an opponent of unionization. On the contrary, I believe that unions have been good for the United States; they have enabled workers to fight for necessary wage increases, safer working conditions, and the right to have their voices heard. The UAW, so far as I know, represents the interests of its industrial-worker members fairly, honestly, and vigorously. This said, however, I am enormously concerned about this current union drive. Its self-appointed organizers have intentionally sought to keep their actions secret from the university community, and have furthermore invited professional organizers onto campus without the consent or knowledge of the vast majority of Brown’s graduate students. Whether we support or oppose the unionization of graduate employees at Brown – and I myself am in favor of some form of collective action – I do not see how we can fail to be alarmed at the shadow campaign that union activists have thus far waged on campus. Before we decide whether to join a union, and especially before we decide what sort of union we should consider joining, I think that we need to answer several key questions:

1. Is a union necessary? Have we exhausted all other attempts to communicate and negotiate with the administration on other terms?
2. What are the specific demands that we as graduate students currently have that we feel are not being met? Is there agreement on these demands across all departments? Will the organizers of the union drive make public their own specific goals before proceeding further?
3. Why has there been no general announcement of this drive, or of the arrival of UAW organizers, to the university community? Who are the individuals who are currently organizing the drive for union? Why are they in charge? Who chose to invite UAW to campus? Don’t we already have an elected Graduate Student Council, and shouldn’t they be representing our interests?

4. Will unionizing antagonize the administration and force it to assume an adversarial position? Will the existence of a union jeopardize the harmonious relationships graduate students have, or try to have, with faculty, the deans, and our departments? Should we give Ruth Simmons a chance to address graduate student concerns before we seek to unionize, or should we take this action just as she assumes her new duties as university president?
5. Will all of Brown's graduate employees be required to join the union? Will graduate employees who are unhappy with the union have the ability to withhold dues?
6. In the case of a strike, what will happen to graduate students who choose to continue teaching? Can we reconcile the notion of a strike with our commitment to provide an education for undergraduates and for ourselves? Is it appropriate for us to withhold education and retard learning in order to make a political point?
7. Does UAW support a seniority system, under which those who have been employees for the longest have the first choice of jobs and better benefits, or a meritocracy, in which those who perform in a superior fashion are rewarded accordingly?
8. If we vote to unionize, will the national union have any authority or control over the local? Will we in any way be under the authority of nationally elected union officials?
9. According to the UAW web site the International Union receives 32% of our dues. The UAW web site suggests that the union is highly involved in national politics and is a powerful lobbying force. How much of our dues money will be used for campaign donations and political lobbying? The UAW represents industrial workers: what is its stance on environmental legislation? Might we be forced to donate money to support politicians we disagree with?
10. In order for the graduate employees to approve a union, organizers need to garner fifty percent of the votes from current graduate employees. Because graduate students may teach or perform research in one semester but not another, however, at any one time not all graduate students are eligible to vote. This semester, for instance, less than one-third of the seventy History graduate students are TAs or graduate employees, although most will work for the university in the coming years. Is there any mechanism we can set up in order to be certain that all potential employees will be represented in the vote? Would it be possible to have a binding straw vote involving all graduate students – not just those currently employed by the University – before the actual vote? How can we include the voices of all graduate students, and ensure that all those who will be affected materially and economically have a say in whether the union is established or not?

Again, I must stress that I am not opposed to the formation of a graduate union at Brown – I just don't like the way this particular campaign is being run and don't think that we should become a local of the UAW. Brown's graduate students have legitimate concerns, not the least of which are mediocre health coverage and the absence of any university guidelines concerning TA responsibilities and rights. To address these concerns, however, I think we need to work *with* the administration, and not secretly organize to work *against* it. As graduate students we should

represent both our university and ourselves; maybe we should leave the fundraising and national political lobbying for another time.