

G.E.O. Fights for Health Care

Study of other universities shows inequity at U of I

by Lucas Sabalka

One of the most important issues facing graduate employees at UIUC is that of health insurance. Simply put, we need effective health care coverage, and we do not have it now.

On December 3rd, GEO members made sure the University heard their concerns. That day, approximately 100 graduate students gathered at Grainger Library during a contract bargaining session. When the University's health care proposal fell far short of the GEO's goals, the members present unanimously moved to stage an informational picket. For almost two hours, those in attendance expressed their discontent as bargaining continued inside Grainger Hall. The impressive turnout and energetic picket emphasized the importance of health care for GEO members. Chanting and picketing were heard within negotiations and visibly affected the University Bargaining Team.

So why is health care such an important issue? Health care costs in the US have seen enormous increases over the past few years. Even for the average US household income of \$41,409 (in 2002, according to the Census Bureau), insurance fees have become a major issue – economically and politically. With the average graduate employee income at \$12,000, we cannot afford the necessary expenses related to maintaining our health.

Furthermore, being insured doesn't mean that you are covered. When Nathalie Morasch, TA in Philosophy, had to have surgery she was appalled to find that insurance wouldn't cover it. "I had to pay \$7,500 out of my own pocket," Morasch said. "My

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John Gergely (center right) walks with nearly one hundred other University employees during a protest staged outside Grainger Hall on December 3. Grads and Faculty alike voiced their discontent with the University's health care proposal.

Membership Matters to You

by Clark Danderson

"What can the GEO do for me?" and "Why should I join?" are two questions I often hear in conversations with colleagues on campus. Before addressing these questions it is important to realize that the GEO, or Graduate Employees' Organization, has been working for the interests of all graduate employees since 1988. Over the years GEO has made real improvements in the lives of graduate employees, including winning a vision and dental plan, back pay for international students who were improperly denied pay, and more recently a 3% pay increase.

Q: "So, what can the GEO do for a grad like me?"

A: Well, in short, a lot. GEO members are working for better and more affordable

healthcare for grads and their families, fair workloads, a strong grievance procedure, livable wages, protection from discrimination, improved training programs, fair evaluations, and policies that protect the rights of international students. These goals are reasonable and some have already been accomplished.

Q: "Well, that's all fine and dandy, but why should I join the union?"

A: Just having a seat at the bargaining table doesn't automatically get us a good contract. Your membership helps make a stronger union, which in turn, results in a better contract with the University. Furthermore, members also have the ability to shape the

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doctor was so shocked that he wrote a letter to the University.”

The GEO is joining in a nationwide fight for better health care coverage – with unions in general and other graduate employee unions in particular. Across the country in recent years, unions have shown universities that graduate students demand affordable coverage. Universities like the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, the University of Michigan, Michigan State University, and New York University (see chart below) are setting national standards, and the GEO is working to join them.

According to Physics RA and GEO chief negotiator Rosemary Braun, “the administration offered absolutely no increase in coverage and a paltry \$75 subsidy over the course of 3 years.” One glance at the included chart makes it very clear why Braun believes the current UIUC graduate health care offer is unacceptable. Total university subsidization of medical, dental, and vision coverage at the other four universities shown is estimated to be \$10-20 million.

At UIUC, the annual contribution is currently \$565,000.

The subsidization at those other universities includes 100 percent of the annual student premium as well as partial payments for dependent coverage, and a much higher average benefit rate. Even in Manhattan, which has one of the highest health care

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costs in the country, NYU covers 90 percent of inpatient hospital visit charges.

At UIUC, graduate employees get no subsidy and receive a base outpatient and inpatient benefit of 80% payment on hospital bills (90% inpatient benefit at Provena Hospital in Urbana).

On top of the subsidies and superior ben-

efits, many universities, have a prescription drug benefit for drug costs beyond those covered by the university health centers. The lack of prescription drug benefit at UIUC causes many grads severe hardship.

“I am paying \$360 a month in prescription drugs,” says Jason Dunick, TA in Economics. “I am hoping something will change.”

The December protest appears to have nudged the University closer to the union’s demands. The University’s latest proposal would double the employer contribution. However, it still remains far from what most grads expect. Ultimately, it would do little to ease the cost to grads and their families.

Greater membership numbers and concerted action during the spring semester will certainly force the University’s to make more substantial offers.

Lucas Sabalka, Mathematics, researches health care for the GEO.

	University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign	University of Massachusetts, Amherst	University of Michigan	Michigan State University	New York University
ANNUAL PREMIUM PAID BY STUDENT	\$642	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
ANNUAL PREMIUM PAID BY UNIVERSITY	\$0	\$2,115	\$2,245	\$1,333	\$1,635
DEPENDENT COVERAGE	Spouse \$2,193 Children \$1,092	Family Plan \$311- \$579 (University pays \$1763- \$3282)	one dependent \$0 (University pays \$2,043) two or more dependents \$240 (\$2,522)	Spouse \$2,838 (University pays \$1,000) Spouse and child \$4,599 (\$1,300)	Student w/ spouse/same sex partner \$5,151 Student & Children \$2,286
OUTPATIENT OFFICE VISIT BENEFIT	80%	100%	100% (possible \$15 copay)	100% (possible \$10 copay)	100% at NYU hospital
INPATIENT HOSPITAL BENEFIT	80%	100%	100% at UMMC	95%	90%
PRESCRIPTION DRUG BENEFIT	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

February 2004

Fellow Graduate Employees,

Although it has been over a year since graduate employees chose to be represented by the G.E.O. in formal negotiations with the University, talks have not yet produced a contract. We have been asked to comment on this situation and say what we think needs to be done to bring the process to a successful close.

First a word about the importance of a contract. A contract codifies the terms of our employment. When these terms and conditions are written down and agreed upon, we will be able to hold the Administration to their word, just as we are held to ours.

More concretely, this contract has the potential to materially improve the lives of graduate employees. This summer we negotiated a higher minimum stipend and a pay raise of no less than 3% for all graduate employees. In addition, we've gotten the Administration to commit to better training procedures, a fair method of resolving disputes, and new protections for international grads.

Still, the most important issues have yet to be resolved. Grads on this campus need better and affordable health care. Grads need to know that their appointments won't be eliminated by administrative fiat. They need to know that their legitimate concerns will not run up against a wall of bureaucratic indifference.

The Administration is playing a waiting game with our contract, Why? Because the university knows that every day without an agreement is a day when it can pay graduate employees less than they deserve, a day when grads bear the cost of their own insurance, and a day when there is no binding process by which its decisions can be questioned. In all of this the Administration is correct.

But the Administration also believes that the longer they delay the weaker our Union will become. They think that we will go away, or that we will settle for less. You decide if the Administration is correct about these things.

This is a strategy which the Administration has used before. The G.E.O. began demanding union representation for graduate employees in 1988. In 1996 a majority of graduate employees signed cards in favor of unionization. In 1997 the G.E.O. decisively won a community sponsored election. Through all of this the Administration pursued a policy of delay and denial. Administration obstacles were only overcome when graduate employees took direct action by withholding their labor.

In the face of this, we cannot counsel patience. We cannot say to our members that bargaining is a process, and that we must quietly accept the limitations of the process. We will not say that we have waited fifteen years and can wait a little longer. But we would remind you all of the value of what we are seeking and would ask for resolute action in the weeks and months ahead.

In Solidarity,

Your GEO Bargaining Team

Graduate Employees' Organization
IFT/AFT Local 6300, AFL-CIO
1001 S. Wright St
Champaign, IL 61820
MC-390

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course of the union and are the only ones who can vote on the graduate employee contract.

“More members creates greater bargaining power which, in turn, results in a better contract with the University.”

Q: “Alright, so joining the union is a good thing. But doesn’t membership involve a lot of time and money?”

A: While an active membership is also key to winning a strong contract, the only requirement of membership is nominal dues of \$3 per month (an amount that is deducted directly from your paycheck). The GEO has won benefits and a pay increase that already far outweigh the membership dues. This contract is a great opportunity to both safeguard these victories and to win

something more. We can’t do it alone, we need you on board!

In closing, I strongly urge you to consider joining the union today. If you have questions feel free to contact the GEO, and we will be happy to address them. Also we invite you to attend the GEO General Membership Meeting on February 18 at 4:45 PM at the University YMCA. Come and vote on the issues that matter to you.

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The GEO is the democratic union of graduate employees at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. For more information visit the web site at www.shout.net/~geo, call our office at (217) 344-8283, or email us at geo@shout.net.