

COGNITION

Newsletter for UE Local 896/COGS
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Learn Your Rights After '17 Labor Law

By Kezia Walker-Cecil

Figuring out what your rights are and what you have a right to as a University of Iowa graduate employee can be an exercise in your research skills. Since the labor laws in Iowa changed in 2017, the policies directing your work and your rights as an employee are spread over several documents instead of being housed in one easy-to-find document.

These rights come from several different sources, and here's a quick breakdown of those sources of your rights as an employee.

(1) You have certain rights just for being an employee in the United States and the state of Iowa. You do not have to be a citizen of the United States or an Iowa resident to have access to these rights. These rights are available to you because you are employed in the U.S. and in Iowa.

(2) You have certain rights based on being part of a union's bargaining unit. You are part of the bargaining unit for UE Local 896/COGS if you are a graduate student employee with a 25% or more appointment. (Union Contract: <https://cogs.org/about-cogs/current-contract-2>)

(3) Following the law change in 2017, many policies were removed from the union-negotiated contract. However, the Graduate College adopted many of those policies and included them in the Graduate Assistant Employment policies. As a graduate student at the University of Iowa, the rights laid out in that document apply to you. The complete list of policies is found here: <https://www.grad.uiowa.edu/graduate-assistant-employment>.

Without further ado, below is a breakdown of (most of) your rights as a University of Iowa employee.

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1997 COGS Coordinating Committee Bargains for first COGS contract

COGS President Reflects on Past Fights

By Michael Goldberg

When I was an undergraduate student here at the University of Iowa, COGS was in its infancy. Less than ten years old, the full tuition stipend hadn't yet been won, and graduate students were still paying all of their fees. I remember seeing actions, reading op-eds, and hearing my TAs talk about their struggles. They wanted adequate com-

pensation, enough to live off of. They wanted to have their tuition and fees covered, so

Some graduate students [pay] nearly a month's salary [in fees]

they didn't have to pay for the privilege of working. They wanted to be treated fairly

by their employers.

Now, our circumstances are better, but our desires are the same. We still pay the University every semester, some graduate students paying nearly a month's salary. We still want to be paid enough to be able to afford rent and groceries. We still want to be treated fairly by our employers, and to not worry that we will be overworked and undervalued.

COGS continues to work hard towards these goals. At the negotiation table last year, we won a significant pay increase. Last October, we had over 1500 graduate employees vote to recertify, sending an irrefutable signal that COGS is graduate workers' chosen representative. This semester, we have made contact with 35 departments across campus, including many that we haven't heard from in a while. We are working hard to hear your voices and improve our situation through collective action.

We need your help! More people means more voices, more ears, more unique stories to tell. Below are five actions you can take, and none of them would take much of your time. If every member does just one of these actions this month, that's hundreds of hours of work towards making the University of Iowa and Iowa City a better place to work

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Know Your Graduate Worker Rights

Your Right to Engage in Union Activity: The Iowa Public Employment Labor Relations Act (a.k.a. section 20 of Iowa law) guarantees that all public employees have the right to "organize, form, join, or assist any employee organization." This law also guarantees that public employers cannot discriminate against or penalize employees who have organized, formed, or joined an employee organization.

Iowa state law also prohibits employers from discouraging employees from joining their unions.

Your Right to a Union Steward: All union members have a right to have a union steward represent/assist them in any investigatory meeting with management. This right is called the Weingarten rights, based on a U.S. Supreme Court case from 1975. This right means that if you have a meeting with your boss (primary instructor, primary researcher, department head) in which you think the conversation may lead to disciplinary action and/or termination, you can bring a union steward with you to the meeting. The union steward is responsible for making sure that your rights as a worker are respected, that you are not being discriminated against, and that your bosses are following correct procedure. (More info on Weingarten Rights and all they entail here: <https://www.umass.edu/usa/weingarten.htm>)

Your Right to a Grievance without Retaliation: Iowa state law prohibits employers from discriminating against or firing employees who have filed a complaint

against their employer.

Your Right to Fair Compensation: All currently enrolled graduate assistant employees at the University of Iowa are covered under the July 1, 2019 – June 30, 2021 contract between UE Local 896/COGS and the Iowa Board of Regents. This contract guarantees the base wages (i.e., minimum wages) for graduate assistant employees for the 2019-2021 academic years. This document also guarantees a 2.1% raise for all returning bargaining unit employees during that time and indicates the salary distribution requirements, both for academic year appointments and for summer session appointments.

Your Right to Not Be Exploited: The Graduate Assistant Employment policy states that an employee with a 25% appointment should expect to work an average of 10 hours a week at the most over the course of their appointment. Employees with a 50% appointment should expect to work an average of 20 hours a week at the most over the course of their appointment. If, over the course of your appointment, you find that you are spending more time on your work than the expected average hours, you are within your rights to grieve against your employer for overwork and to negotiate a change in your employment, whether it be a decrease in your responsibilities or an increase in your pay.

Your Right to a Grievance Procedure: In the Graduate Assistant Employment policy, the grievance procedure is laid out. As a reminder, you have a right to a steward to

Steward for your department. To learn more about these positions, come to the next General Membership Meeting!

(4) Take a few minutes to talk to each of your classmates about COGS. In the few minutes before class starts, ask how many are members, how many have heard of COGS, and what they know about unions. Want ideas about how to have these conversations? Let us know!

(5) Volunteer to spend an hour with our organizer, David. Having organizing conversations, and getting new members, is always easier with someone who can speak

help walk you through this process. You do not need to do this alone.

Your Right to a Tuition and Fee Scholarship: The Graduate Assistant Employment policy guarantees that all graduate assistant employees with an appointment of 25% or more will receive a 100% tuition scholarship (based on the tuition rate for the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences). These graduate students are also guaranteed a 50% waiver for certain fees.

Your Right to a Safe Working Environment: The Graduate Assistant Employment policy promises that the University will provide a safe work environment.

Your Right to Paid Time Off: The Graduate Assistant Employment policies include policies on paid leave, paid holidays, and sick leave. All employees with an academic year or semester appointment are allowed five working days of absence per semester without a pay deduction, provided that the employee's supervisor approves that time off. Graduate employees also have the right to be absent due to illness without losing pay for up to 13.5 days during an academic year appointment. These 13.5 days of sick leave can also be used as family illness and/or bereavement leave.

Your Right to Training: The Graduate Assistant Employment policy also includes a guarantee that employees will receive the training necessary for the completion of their jobs. This training can include teacher training, evaluations, training in research and laboratory procedures, and training in administrative requirements. ●

*Kezia Walker-Cecil is Chief Campus Steward.
Contact Kezia at chief-steward@cogs.org*

Past Fights Inspire Forward Thinking

and live.

(1) If you teach, tell your students about COGS and about the life of a graduate student worker. Undergraduates can be powerful allies.

(2) Come to the next General Membership Meeting, and tell your department colleagues about what COGS is doing.

(3) Volunteer to be a Representative or a

directly to the graduate employee experience. Email us at cogs@cogs.org to volunteer.

Thank you for being a member of COGS. Your support is crucial to what we do. We can't thank you enough for any amount of time or energy you can give in order to strengthen our collective voice. Graduate employees like you were out organizing back when I was an undergrad! Our fight continues. Remember, the university works because we do! ●

*Michael Goldberg is President of COGS.
Contact Michael at president@cogs.org*

COGS Reps UI Grads at UE Nat'l Meeting

By Ashley Dorn

So much happened in one week at the National Convention. We sang "We're Not Gonna Take It" at 9am, heard from activists working on climate and healthcare policy, endorsed Bernie Sanders, met and celebrated with workers from the strike against GM/Wabtec, elected a new UE President, Carl Rosen, and went on a boat ride to admire the many bridges of Pittsburgh.

I had the opportunity to serve on the most dreaded committee, the Resolutions Committee. It is dreaded for the long hours of reading, editing, and debating language and phrasing. As a graduate student, however, I felt prepared. The resolutions are authored by local unions around the country and by the national officers. Together, they constitute the policy of UE for the two years until the next convention. Serving on the committee helped me learn what issues the officers and locals are most concerned about, how they articulate problems, and how they envision equitable and safe workplaces for all of us. Throughout the rest of the week, the resolutions were read aloud by members of the Resolutions Committee so that the floor could hear, debate, suggest changes or amendments, and voice support in UE democratic fashion (passed resolutions can be read on ueunion.org under UE Policy). I read the policy on collective bargaining before the floor, which stood with workers in Iowa and North Carolina where



Labor and Solidarity Chair Ashley Dorn and COGS Vice President Caleb Klipowicz join UE Sisters and Brothers in Support of Healthcare Rights.

recent law changes have gutted our collective bargaining rights.

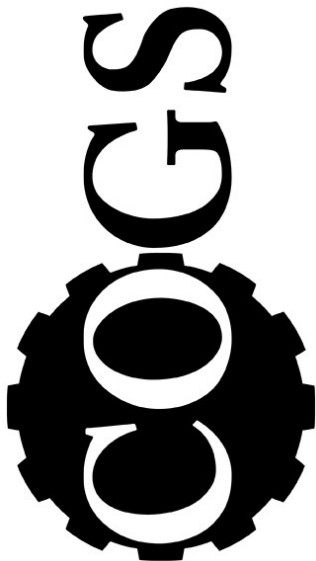
After the morning general assembly with speakers and floor debate, we picked two workshops from a slate of offerings, including grievance procedure, organizing in an open shop, international allies, and more. I attended organizing and international allies. The organizing report and workshop emphasized that there have been tough fights across the country in the past couple years: recertification votes in Iowa,

the strike against GM/Wabtec in Pennsylvania, and new locals of para educators in New Jersey and drivers for Halcon. While these fights have been difficult, they have also been successful and brought new members and new workplaces into the union.

The International Allies workshop (moderated by COGS former president Kari Thompson!) heard from a panel of representatives and translators from unions around the world allied with UE: Unifor in Canada, Frente Autentico de Trabajo in Mexico, Zenroren in Japan, and the Federation of Metallurgical Employees workers, a member of the Italian General Confederation of Labor in Italy. When the Italian representative addressed the floor, he said he would speak in Italian because his English is as bad as capitalism. Taken together, their reports made clear that the strategies used against workers to precaritize work—such as temporary positions, company unions, and poor conditions forced on migrant workers—transcend national boundaries, but so too do resistance and solidarity.

For me, attending the convention helped me understand that our local is part of a larger family. It was comforting to be met with sympathy and congratulations for our recertification process, and humbling to see the wealth of skill and experience that filled the room. ●

Ashley Dorn is Chair of the Labor and Solidarity Committee. Contact Ashley at labor-solidarity@cogs.org



Engage with COGS! Attend our next General Membership Meeting.

January 29th, 2020

Wesley Center

120 N. Dubuque St.

Members run this union, and we need you!

Medicare For All Would Mean Healthcare for All Grad Workers

By **Lizzy Handschy**

In August of 2015, just days after I began graduate school here at the University of Iowa, I read a Facebook post from a friend who, at the time, was a PhD student at the University of Missouri. She stated that graduate students at Mizzou had lost their health insurance. While this wasn't a totally accurate description of the situation, her Facebook post nonetheless inspired fear in me about the potential precarity of being a graduate worker. After sharing what I'd read with my officemates, a more senior graduate student reassured me that this couldn't happen to us because at Iowa, we are unionized, and our health insurance is guaranteed in a legally binding contract.

Back in 2017, all of that changed. In February of 2017, Iowa Republicans proposed legislation that stripped public sector unions, like COGS, of many of our rights. Because this legislation passed, public sector unions are no longer allowed to bargain over health insurance. While we still have GradCare, it is no longer in our legally-binding contract, but in University policy instead. This means the University can

change this policy at any time.

Healthcare is not the only thing we lost the ability to negotiate over when this law passed. As it stands, our wages are essentially the only thing protected by our contract, and much of what we used to have in

With Medicare for All, every graduate worker at Iowa and at any university, unionized or not, would have access to health insurance.

our contract is now in University policy. Since these changes, COGS has been grappling with what it means to be a union when our official bargaining rights are so limited. If the purpose of a union is to protect the rights and wellbeing of its workers, how do we do this now?

In terms of healthcare, there is a solution that will protect our current health insurance, and would have even protected the non-unionized graduate workers of

Mizzou. That solution is single-payer healthcare, or Medicare for All. With Medicare for All, every graduate worker at Iowa and at any university, unionized or not, would have access to health insurance. Our access to affordable health insurance would not be decided by the whims of university administrators or state legislators. The UE National has recently endorsed a "Health Care for All" policy platform, noting that if unions no longer need to negotiate over healthcare, that leaves them resources to negotiate for other benefits, like paid sick leave and vacation time.

In the past, COGS has not endorsed policy platforms or candidates. But with the new limitations to our bargaining rights, this is something we should reconsider. At our December General Membership Meeting we will discuss whether we should endorse policy platforms, and specifically discuss endorsing Medicare for All. I personally believe a union should fight for the wellbeing of its workers in any way, and I support COGS officially endorsing Medicare for All! ●

Lizzy Handschy is Chair of the Press and Publicity Committee. Contact Lizzy at cogs@cogs.org

UE Stands in Solidarity with Iowa Workers after '17 Labor Law

By **Caleb Klipowicz**

Like most members, when I joined COGS I had never been part of a union before and I really had no idea what it meant to be a "local" in a national union. I mostly just ignored stuff I saw around the office about our parent union the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America (UE for short). I knew they sent folks to help with our organizing drive and the re-certification vote, and that was about it. But after serving as one of our delegates to the UE 76th National Convention, I'd like to let you all in on a little secret—UE is pretty rad! While UE may not be the biggest or best known union in the US, from what I saw at the convention I can say with confidence that we are part of one of the most progressive, democratic, and forward thinking unions out there.

Over the course of the week, representatives brought up concerns over racial justice, the climate crisis, gender identity, and sexual orientation; we heard from speakers

that included a lead organizer of the West Virginia Teachers Strike, international solidarity allies, and a little-known Senator from Vermont named Bernie. Somewhere between everyone calling each other "brother" and "sister," meeting comrades from all over, and taking part in a Medicare for All direct action on the streets of Pittsburgh, I found myself energized to come back to organizing here at the U of I.

At the convention I also got to hear about the struggles and many successes of our union brothers, sisters, and siblings across the country. Strong locals continue to fight for better wages and working conditions by any means necessary, and new locals are organizing from coast to coast. I also felt better seeing the dismay on others' faces when they heard about the many challenges we face here as a result of the 2017 union-busting law. As in other right-to-work (for less!) states, here in Iowa the deck is stacked against us. But we are far from alone!

As your Vice President for Organizing this year I still have a lot to learn. I know I may not get the privilege of being a UE member for as long as the other representatives I met. But I am grateful that we are part of a bigger union family that is independent, democratic, and committed to making life better for all working people in the world. While it's easy to lose sight of this bigger struggle over the ups and downs of a semester, I find encouragement knowing we're part of something much larger than ourselves. ●

Caleb Klipowicz is COGS Vice President of Organizing. Contact Caleb at vp@cogs.org

Have something to say to COGnition?

Submit a Letter to the Chair!

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COGS Press and Publicity Chair
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