

COGNition

Newsletter for UE Local 896-COGS

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A Message from the Outgoing President

I was elected president of COGS in April 2021. I was hopeful, but also nervous. I had never pictured myself serving as president. COGS was my first union, and I had served for a year on the Coordinating Committee as Blue Area Steward. But as I lead my first GMM last May, I worried that my knowledge was shaky. I didn't remind myself of any of the COGS presidents I'd known.

What I learned, though, is that being president, like being an active member, consists of contributing individual strengths to a team effort and learning as you go. My role was often asking questions, to the other Coordinators, to members old and new, to those past presidents I mentioned, and to our UE Representative, Greg. My big lessons? I gained a more solid understanding that a union's power comes from its members' engagement. I learned how to confront administrators forcefully while maintaining open dialogue. I honed a sense of the strategy that goes into union organizing. Most of all, I learned about solidarity.

Solidarity is a phrase used often in the union, connoting the mutual aid members provide one another on work and community issues. This past semester, at a particularly stressful moment, another Coordinator took the time to just listen to me fret. When I thanked them, they replied, "This to me is also what solidarity means." I hadn't heard it put quite like that before, and it opened my eyes. Solidarity means that we are not just here to get our work done and go home. We listen; we act as each other's net. It makes us all stronger.

I hope my reflection here might encourage you to attend a COGS meeting. Volunteer in the Recertification campaign. Be a steward for your department. Come to a social. These are all ways to make our community stronger. It's never any one individual that knows or does it all. Each voice, each listener, and each small effort make the union run.

In solidarity,
Hadley Galbraith



Not Taking it Lying Down: A Recap of COGS Last Year



Image credit: Little Village Magazine

August 2021: COGS Against COVID kicks off with Die-In Action on Pentacrest

September 2021: OSHA complaint filed for campus COVID risks, helping to trigger investigation

October 2021: Fall Membership Blitz

November 2021: COGS members meet with UI Admin re: COVID stress and risk

January 12, 2022: UI in the Big 10 re: COVID Precautions social media post receives record attention on-line

January 2022: BoR instates new safety policies in-line with COGS demands; Instructor E-Pivot undertaken

Spring 2022: Organized workers in dance to improve working conditions and win back pay for overwork

March 2022: OSHA investigation closes; UI not cited, but OSHA recognizes significant inadequacies per CDC

June 2022: BoR Public Comment Takeover

New members: 45; New departmental stewards: 8



COGS Organizes ‘E-pivot’ in Response to Reckless University of Iowa

By Glenn Houlihan and Hannah Zadeh, Reprinted from UE News

When the University of Iowa (UI) announced its disastrous plans for teaching spring semester classes in-person without any COVID-19 safety measures in place, members of UE Local 896-COGS, the democratic, rank-and-file union of graduate workers at UI, were appalled.

As a union, we have been steadfast in holding UI accountable during the pandemic and demanding COVID-19 protections for workers and students, as we outlined in the autumn 2021 issue of UE News. These demands, while straightforward and easy to implement, have been repeatedly rebuffed by the Iowa Board of Regents. Staggeringly, even the current wave of Omicron sweeping through the country and infecting both the vaccinated and unvaccinated wasn't enough for the Board of Regents to change course. Although the university has adopted a fraction of our demands—providing KN95 masks across campus and reinstating emails that showed instructors if students were out sick—these measures alone are wholly insufficient to counter a strain as infectious as Omicron.

A week before classes started, on Tuesday January 11th, COGS hosted an emergency COVID meeting online to discuss graduate worker concerns and formulate our response to the university's plan. At the meeting, a member of the Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO) at the University of Michigan (UM) spoke about their plans for an 'e-pivot' at UM: taking classes online for the first two weeks of the semester, with or without the approval of university administrators. The GEO member's presentation struck a chord with COGS members in attendance. If UI continued to ignore our written demands, it was time to take matters into our own hands. Those in attendance at the emergency meeting voted overwhelmingly to release a list of demands for reasonable,

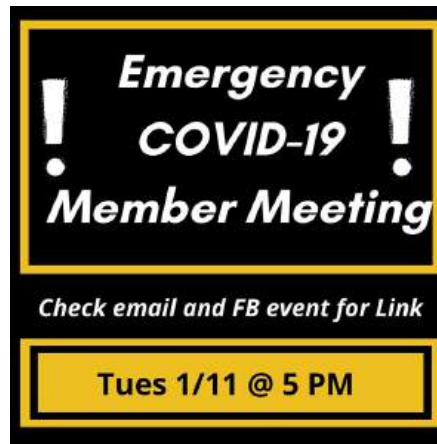
common-sense protocols to protect students and employees and, crucially, to pursue the possibility of organizing our own e-pivot action at UI.

While the organizing at UM was bold and empowering, it was important to acknowledge that the GEO had both a higher number of members and a more robust stewards network than our own. This made planning a similar action difficult, but far from impossible. To that end, we began a rapid and multi-pronged effort that included polling members to assess how popular the e-pivot action was, drafting letters of non-retaliation to send to supervisors and heads of departments, and launching what became our most popular social media campaign in recent memory. Our social media strategy, #UIRanksLast, was inspired by a member who pointed out that while the university loves to brand itself as a leader and a winner, it ranked dead last out of Big Ten schools for COVID safety. In addition, we texted our bargaining unit with information about the e-pivot and encouraged them to join the action.

Despite not getting the number of e-pivot pledges we were hoping for, enough members signed up to make the direct action viable, and we officially announced the e-pivot on Friday January 14th. "We are in a crisis," read our email to members. "There must be a certain point where we stop following rules in order to protect ourselves, our students, and our community. But

COGS will be there to support you every step of the way!" Across the university, graduate workers took their classes online: often in clear opposition to threats and coercion from Departmental Executive Officers to teach in person. Regional media picked up on our action, and COGS members explained on television and in print why the e-pivot was a vital method of fighting back against the university's utter indifference to a lethal virus. We also received excellent coverage in The Daily Iowan, UI's student newspaper, as op-eds and editorials demanded better safety measures at the university. Underlining the e-pivot's popularity, our monthly General Membership Meeting had the highest turnout of any this academic year, with members detailing how the action was developing in their department.

The discussion and testimonies from members at that meeting made clear that many of us were deeply frustrated by UI's dereliction of duty and energized to carry the action into the second week. Our organizing prevented hundreds of classes from meeting in-person during a period when our county was reporting over 300 new cases per day (doubling the case rate from the weeks prior). Moreover, the process of organizing the e-pivot was useful in other ways: we brought in members who had previously been less active, and we were pushed to grapple with difficult questions regarding taking risks and understanding what kind of protections we could and could not guarantee as a union. As always, our work advocating for COVID protections, supporting those who remain online, and fighting to improve working conditions at UI this semester is far from over.



...it was time to take matters into our own hands.

Posting for the People

An Interview with Caleb Klipowicz and Apoorv Ingle

Q: How did you get involved with the Press and Publicity Committee (PPC)?

CK: We saw the amazing work COGS alum Lizzy Hand-schy did the past two years managing socials and our press. She was the one that got COGS a Canva account to make better looking posts on Instagram and Facebook. We wanted to keep that going as best we could. When I found out we didn't have anyone running COGS social media over the summer, I volunteered to help out until we found someone more permanent. Of course as these things go, my "temporary" position ended up lasting all year long.

AI: I got to know about COGS around the same time Caleb got the twitter handle active. I really liked the initiatives the union was taking up and wanted to be a part of it. I realized Caleb had taken up that huge task of producing all the content by coordinating with everyone and also posting it on different social media channels we have. I just picked up the easiest task of handling the proofreading and posting it online.

25th Anniversary Alumni Perspectives

This Spring, COGS reached out to alumni to gather their thoughts about the union. We got \ responses from alums whose graduation years span from 1999 to 2019! Read on for reflections, advice, and hope for the future.

Q: Looking back, what stands out about your time with COGS?

"It redirected my career and priorities."

"The dedication of colleagues. Tremendous perseverance ultimately brought victory."

"The friendships and the organizing. I loved talking to fellow grad students and community members about possibilities and accomplishments--about making things better for us and future generations."

Q: What advice would you give to current members? To the new CC (Co-ordinating Committee)?

"They say the hardest thing about grad school is just to keep going. It's so easy to just stop. Justice is the same, in a lot of ways. The hardest thing is just to keep going. Build community, build solidarity, keep going."

"Please remember you are building a broad-based movement; think Big Tent, not small sect."

CK: I have to say too that getting Apoorv and the rest of the PPC together has been a huge help! He immediately came with great ideas for how to better manage our posts and make sure what we share is more accessible to folks. It has been so much better to work as a team!

AI: Working in a team is definitely fun and it also makes us accountable in a way and it keeps the social media activity buzzing.

A sampling of COGS Instagram posts from the past year.



25th Anniversary Alumni Perspectives (cont'd)

“They say the hardest thing about grad school is just to keep going. It’s so easy to just stop. Justice is the same, in a lot of ways. The hardest thing is just to keep going. Build community, build solidarity, keep going.”

“Please remember you are building a broad-based movement; think Big Tent, not small sect.”

“You are making a difference! Your labor, organizing, fellowship, and activism matter to people that you’ll possibly never even meet. To the CC specifically: stay organized and communicate so others can build off your work instead of having to repeat it.”

Q: Looking forward, what do you hope for COGS members and the future of labor in higher ed?

“Recognition of the value each member has, the value we bring to students, and full rights to the fruits of that value.”

“I believe we are at a turning point. Awareness of—and a willingness to fight for—real change has never been stronger in my lifetime.”

“To continue to represent grad students and help them along their path toward completion of their degrees.”

“Labor organizing is needed more than ever in places like Iowa even though it’s the hardest there. I hope members see how far we’ve come and have the larger context of how important their work is.”

Q: Anything else you want to share?

A: “1996 was the beginning. You are the future.”

“Thank you for giving us COGS alumni the chance to weigh in; all the best to you.”

“You guys are amazing! Keep up the fight!”



COGS Members joined the picket line with members of UAW local 74 striking at John Deere in Ottumwa, IA in October!



This picture accompanied a letter of support to MIT graduate workers, who held a successful election in March to unionize with UE!

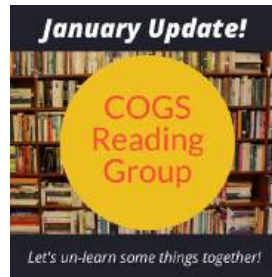


Solidarity in Action

COGS members at a rally for higher wages, organized by members of SEUI Local 199, representing caregivers at UIHC, in June.



New Developments



In early Spring 2022, a new monthly COGS Reading Group was



New, member-designed t-shirts hit the ground in late Spring 2022!

25th Anniversary Celebration!

“It was fantastic to end the semester by spending quality time in the sun with COGS comrades!

The location in City Park was idyllic, and the social committee did a superb job organizing delicious pizza, cold drinks, and music. I even spent an hour playing a cricket game with Hammad on his N64 - a rare and welcome occurrence in Iowa. Thank you to everyone who joined us!”

--Glenn Houlihan, Chief Campus Steward



Meet the New Coordinating Committee (CC)!

Hannah Zadeh President	John Tappen VP for Organizing	Glenn Houlihan Chief Campus Steward
Josh Foley Recording Officer	Rob Silverman-Ascher Blue Area Steward	Ang Malenda Yellow Area Steward
Andy Williams International Student Rep	Todd Rhoades Social Chair	Rajorshi Das Unity Chair
Caleb Klipowicz Press and Publicity Chair	Solomon Fenton Miller Political Action Chair	Rachel Lazar Labor Solidarity Chair
Andrea Smith Katie Gilbert Cassidy Oberreuter Trustees	WANTED Financial Officer Reg and Green Area Stewards Bargaining, Grievance, and Organizing at Large	



COGS members rallied outside the Levitt Center prior to the public comment session.

COGS Members Demand Real Raises, Benefits at BoR Public Comment Session

On May 31, 2022, the Board of Regents, which circulates locations for its regular Board Meetings through the different regents schools, kicked off a 3-day meeting at UI. This first day included a public comment session, presenting an opportunity to speak directly to the Regents. COGS members took the opportunity up readily, demonstrating prior to the session, and storming the session itself to take their turn at the mic.

Members presented concerns including better safety measures in light of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, the lack of parental leave in UI instructor contracts, and, urgently, the need for meaningful raises for graduate workers, in light of soaring inflation.

American Studies graduate student and Chief Campus Steward Glenn Houlihan cited the particular pressure inflation puts on international students like himself, whose VISAs limit their employment to the University. The Board of Regents is officially the employer of UI graduate workers, and with new contracts on the horizon, members were eager to establish a fair raise as a top priority, closely followed by better benefits. “Anything under inflation is effectively a paycut--which none of us will stand for,” one member stated in closing out their comments.



New COGS President Hannah Zadeh calls for the inclusion of parental leave in TA and RA contracts.

