

COGNition



UE 896 COGS

NEWS

The Campaign to Organize Graduate Students (COGS) February, 2025
The union representing Teaching and Research Assistants at the University of Iowa since 1996

COGS moves BoR to offer a 6% raise over two years – Escalating actions planned

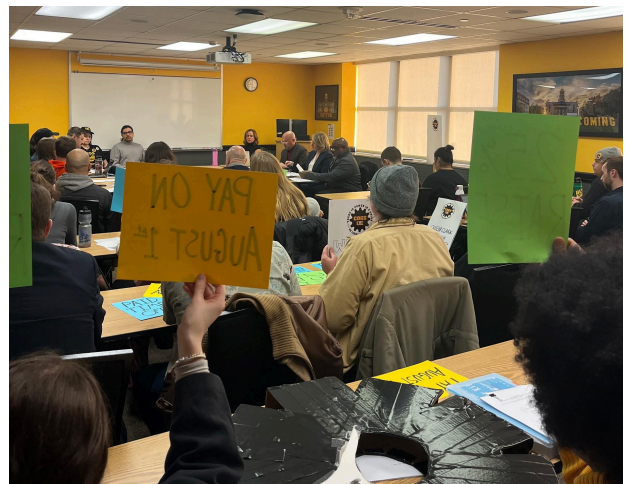
On Thursday, February 6, nearly 100 University of Iowa graduate workers, undergrads, and community allies gathered for an open bargaining session with the Board of Regents.

Here is the tl;dr: COGS proposed a 25% increase in wages over two years. Via their lawyers, the Board of Regents offered a 6% increase over two years.

Believe it or not, getting an offer over the legal minimum from the BOR is a historic win for us, and it means our pressure campaign is paying off. This year, the BOR was legally required to give us a 5% raise. Some years, they offer 0% and force us to fight them. (Yep.) UE field organizer **Greg Cross**, who has been with the union for decades, said: “To my knowledge, this is the first time since 2017 (when the legislature dismantled Chapter 20 of the Code of Iowa, restricting the wage increase an arbitrator can award in an impasse arbitration) that the BOR or the State of Iowa has proposed a wage increase higher than the maximum that an arbitrator could award to the Union.” This historic proposal from the BOR would not have

happened without the actions of the membership. Those actions include the recertifying of Local 896 COGS with one of our largest margins of victory, the local taking our message directly to BOR and to the University President and our rallies and great membership participation for the open sessions of bargaining when the initial proposals are exchanged.” This also means that in the past, when the BOR told us they *had* to give us no more than the legal minimum raise, that was nonsense.

Every time we showed up for our union in the past two years, we scared the state into giving us a little more money. Let’s keep that up.



Here's the full story of what went down on Thursday:

There were good, angry vibes. Workers were pissed about living on less than \$22k (plus paying fees to work!) while teaching the next generation to read, write, think, and do literal rocket science. The University expects us to go above and beyond as educators and scholars, even though we're the 16th (!) worst paid in the Big 10.

But the Board of Regents didn't even show up.

They sent their lawyers and University of Iowa administrators. "It's disrespectful for the regents to not take the time to show up today," said Red Area steward and physics RA **Olivia Jones**. "These Regents approve multimillion dollar projects in one meeting, but paying grad students the 25% raise they deserve makes them clutch their pearls. We are not less worthy than seven administrators who received higher raises than we did in 2023-2024."

Still, grad workers and allies packed the board room and filled the hallway.

What were our contract proposals?

We proposed a real raise for grad workers—25% over two years

"In 2025, graduate wages are more than \$5,000 behind our wages from the year 2000, adjusted for inflation. This is a direct failure of the Board of Regents," said **Jacob Payne**, Bargaining & Grievance at-large Committee Member, and physics RA. "The Regents' 2022 strategic plan talks about maintaining the quality of education. The Regents clearly fail to hit this

mark if they do not provide upkeep for our state universities and employees."



"A living wage for Johnson County, Iowa is \$35,000, but we don't see anything close to that," said Jacob. "The minimum salary for graduate workers this school year is \$21,969. That's \$13,000 less. Shame on our Board of Regents for demeaning educators and scientists at our State Universities with such low salaries."

We proposed that the first pay period start on August 1

“As it currently stands, graduate students starting a new appointment at the beginning of the school year receive their first payment at the beginning of September, despite many graduate students working through the month of August. This leaves many students in a state of severe financial burden, and many of them start their appointments already in debt,” said **Gage Liddiard**, Green Area Steward and neuroscience RA. “Unsurprisingly, workers need places to live in Iowa City. The renting cycle in Iowa City turns over at the end of July through the first week of August. This means that the cost of an apartment’s security deposit, rent, and any associated moving and travel costs all come due well before a grad student would see even a single cent from the University. This affects the overwhelming majority of grad workers.”

We urged the Board of Regents to include a clear paid time off policy in our contract. (Because why doesn’t the University want us to know our rights?)

Regina Napolitano, Blue Area Steward and rhetoric TA, turned to the room packed with grad workers and asked:

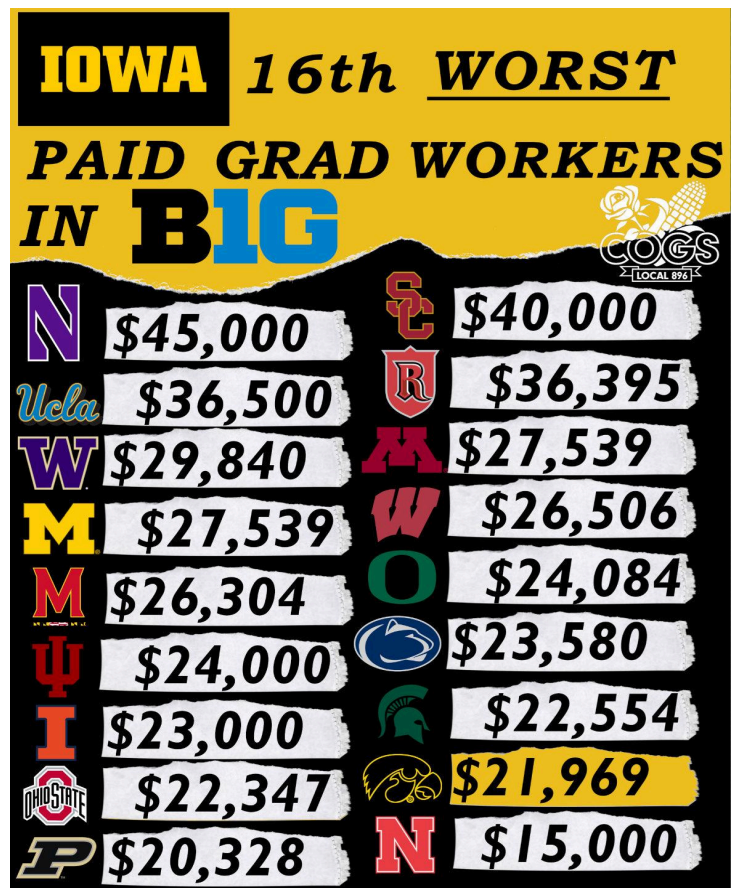
1. Did you know that you are entitled to 5 days of paid time off a semester?
2. Did you know that you are entitled to 13.5 days of sick leave a school year?
3. Did you know that you get 5 days of Family Illness leave a year?
4. Did you know that you get 3 days of bereavement leave?

No, most of us did not.

“Current paid time off policies for graduate student workers are confusing. Workers are not aware of how much time off they receive nor what they should do when they inevitably need a day off,” Regina told the room. “Graduate students are often pressured to work when we are sick. We are encouraged to do the work of finding a substitute, providing materials to teach our classes, to teach via zoom, or even to teach our classes in-person, despite our illnesses.”

Plus, we highlighted our wins

“COGS has helped graduate workers win thousands of dollars as a result of successful grievances for overwork,” said **Amanda Kozar**, Chief Area Steward, and history TA. “This process remains an important tool to resolve conflict in our workplace. Today, the grievance process is laid out in the [Graduate Student Employment Standards](#). We urge the Regents to put the grievance process back in the bargaining



agreement, so filing a grievance is reliably available to graduate workers in the future.”
What condescending nonsense did the Board of Regents pay a lawyer to say on their behalf?

Lawyer: “I want folks to know that the data or the number that is in your collective bargaining agreement is a *minimum* amount. It is the entry or the base wage. It is the *minimum* that must be paid.”

Translation: *The University of Iowa could pay you all more. They’re choosing not to. Take it up with them!*

Lawyer: “As you can imagine sometimes our interpretation of data that we collect is...different than yours.”

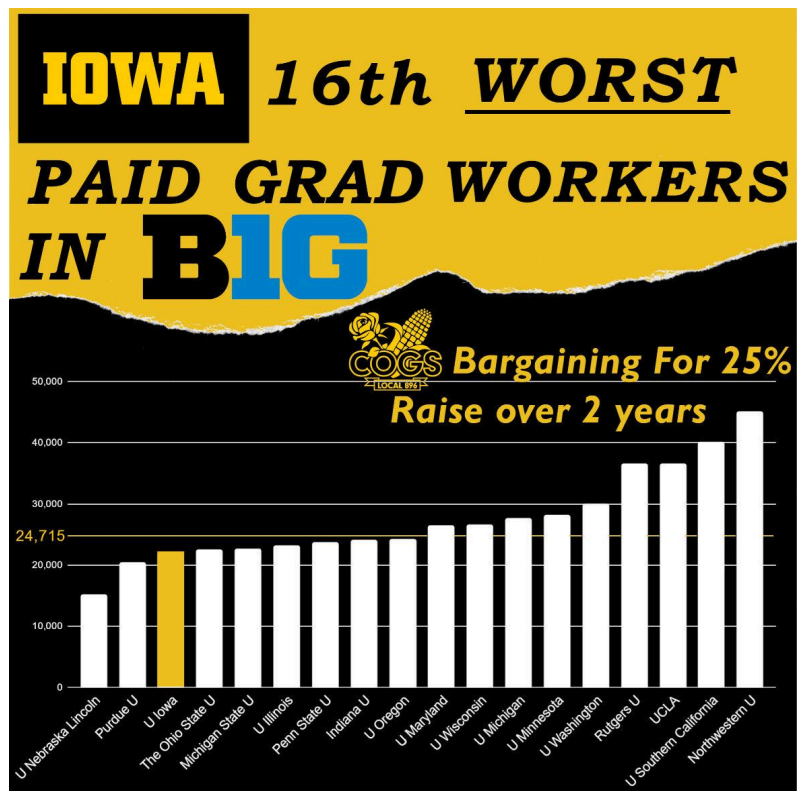
Translation: *PLEASE don’t tell the whole world that you are the 16th worst paid in the Big 10, and that you have to take second jobs that distract you from focusing on teaching and research.*

Lawyer: “On a per hour basis we’re paying \$32.69 at the minimum.”

Translation: *I am conveniently ignoring the fact that you are only contracted to work 20 hours/week (or less), and so these are still poverty wages. Using my own logic, I declare that you are rich (even though your paycheck-to-paycheck living says otherwise.)*

Lawyer: “Also, it’s very important, we believe, to point out that as you folks all know GAs appointed at at least 25% are also receiving academic tuition and access to almost free health insurance.”

Translation: *We are trying so hard to convince you that tuition remission and health insurance are a generous gift from your employer, instead of compensation that was hard won by our*

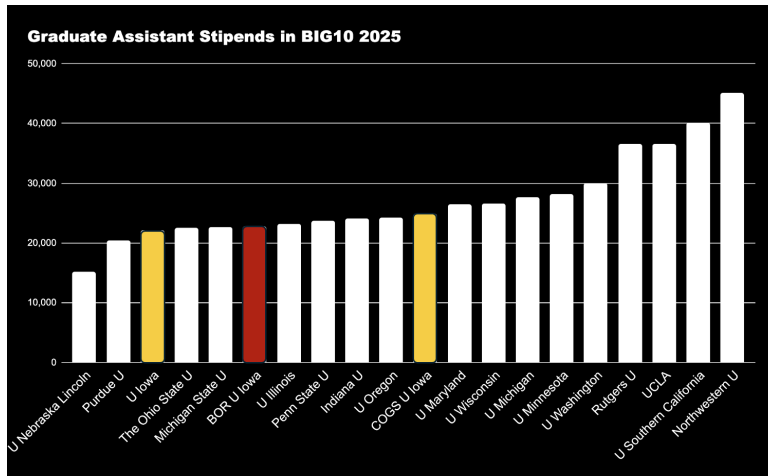


union and that you earn every day by doing your job.

What did union members ask the Board of Regents lawyers?

Tons of questions that they could not answer. Here are a few that stumped them:

1. Why isn't the Board of Regents here?
2. UI is already an unattractive option for international students. Without a real pay increase, how do you think this will change?
3. If your child or spouse worked as a graduate worker at the University of Iowa, would you be worried about their quality of life?
4. How low will you let Iowa go in terms of ranking, prestige, and quality because of your unwillingness to pay us a living wage?



The first yellow bar shows our current stipends. The red bar shows where our stipends would sit if we got the raise offered by the Board of Regents. The second yellow bar shows where we would sit if we got the raise proposed by COGS.

Check out coverage of open bargaining in [Iowa Capitol Dispatch](#), [CBS2Iowa](#), [The Daily Iowan](#), [Little Village](#), [The Corridor Business Journal](#), and [KGAN](#).

Our next General Membership Meeting is on **February 25 at 6pm** at the Iowa City Public Library. All grad workers are welcome to join us.

Look out for an **exciting action in early March** ;)

What comes next?

Next is a closed bargaining session on **February 20**. The COGS Contract Bargaining team will meet with the Board of Regents to try to hammer out a contract. We need as many people as possible to participate in a **grade-in demonstration**. Let's pack the hallway outside the meeting so the BOR sees that grad workers make this University work, and we aren't going to stop causing trouble until we get a better deal.

And get ready to **boycott One Day For Iowa on March 26**. This is the annual fundraiser where the university makes our departments beg alums and donors for money, distracting Iowans from the fact that the University budget allocates money away from educators and towards building projects and administrators. Join COGS in disrupting the rosy picture that the University paints on One Day For Iowa. We're not just a bunch of cheerful Hawkeyes who'd love a few bucks for better microscopes or white boards. We're overworked, underpaid educators and researchers who would love to be paid a fair wage for the work we do to make this university look good.

Location and time are still to be determined (the Board of Regents have *such* a busy schedule, right?). We'll bring the coffee, you bring your TA and GA work, and we'll chill in the hallway and show the Regents what it looks like to actually do a job. Bring your students, and tell your faculty!



Last year's Boycott One Day For Iowa event