

THE  
STONY  
BROOK  
WORKER

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**THE STONY BROOK WORKER**

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Stony Brook GSEU Living Wage Campaign Organizers on April 21, 2022.

# STONY BROOK WORKER EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

## The Stony Brook Worker Editorial

As the editors of *The Stony Brook Worker*, we are excited to present to you the first issue of our new publication. We are all members and organizers in the Graduate Student Employees Union (GSEU) at Stony Brook University. Our campus and community is home to many different labor struggles, all of which are invaluable. The struggles that we endure collectively keep the workers that make up our community safe and healthy, and we seek to ensure that all of us receive what we deserve: a fair wage, respect, dignity, and a life that is fulfilling.

Even though it is our labor and collective efforts that build, sustain, and further our institutions at and beyond Stony Brook University, we have noticed that many of us are not aware of each others' struggles and issues. And while we are divided and alienated from one another in this context, those who manage our workplaces move with unified action and communication. This needs to change. We may be workers toiling away in different places, jobs, and capacities, but the issues that we face — including but not limited to overwork, lack of hazard pay, expectations to perform unpaid labor, and of course wages that are below any living wage thresholds — apply to us all, and they unify us in a clear way: As divided individuals, we are at the behest of our respective employers, but when we unite as workers, we can challenge those power dynamics.

This current status quo of power structures between workers and managers in our workplaces and in society overall reflects a clear imperative for us to break down the barriers between us, and to unite as workers. This unity is indispensable if

we are to create a workplace in which we have a voice. Striving for complete workplace democracy, we envision a workplace in which the power of determination over our lives and workplace lie within our own hands, and we believe this to be a fundamental requirement of a democratic and just society as a whole. That is why we see labor solidarity as directly tied to our living conditions beyond our campus community.

Furthermore, we know that many of us who are academic workers produce significant research that intersects with labor issues. This work may be difficult for everyone to reach and relate to since, up until this moment, we did not have a unified publication dedicated to this topic. We believe that the political and practical promises of this kind of research need an outlet that will combine academic research and labor struggles, and communicate these to our community on a regular basis.

Guided by these principles and visions, we decided to start *The Stony Brook Worker* as a publication that will unify practical, historical, and theoretical questions and themes related to all aspects of labor, and to create a platform for our community where we can share ideas and advance our struggles. In these pages of the first issue of *The Stony Brook Worker*, we have interviews with all the unions on our campus, as well as with the Long Island Federation of Labor, in which we discuss various issues and struggles that they are facing. You will also find historical accounts of the origins of May Day, the abolition of broad-based fees at Stony Brook, and GSEU's Living Wage Campaign. We also give

you an overview of Fordham University graduate workers' recent successful unionization campaign in which GSEU organizers played an active role. Moreover, this issue includes an art review of a recent exhibition curated by graduate workers, a review of the conference "The Global Sixties in

the Global South" that took place at SBU, and an investigation of issues related to housing, which affects graduate students and the Suffolk County community at large. We hope that our publication will encourage and further meaningful discourse about these issues in our community.

## WHAT IS THE GRADUATE STUDENT EMPLOYEES UNION (GSEU)?

### The Stony Brook Worker Editorial

*This editorial piece gives a general overview of what the GSEU is, and it addresses some common misconceptions that we hear from graduate workers.*

Firstly, to set the record straight: GSEU is not a club, student organization, or political party! GSEU is a public sector union, which was first founded in 1974 and officially recognized in 1992. GSEU members are part of the Education Division of the Communications Workers of America, Local 1104. As a statewide union, the GSEU represents all teaching and graduate assistants in the SUNY system. Across New York State, different GSEU chapters represent TAs and GAs at the various campuses in the SUNY university centers. In addition to GSEU Stony Brook, the union's chapters include GSEU Buffalo University, GSEU Binghamton University, GSEU at Albany, and GSEU At Large (representing smaller colleges). Overall, GSEU has over 4,300

members statewide and over 1,100 members here at Stony Brook University alone.

As the labor union that represents graduate student workers, we as GSEU collectively bargain and negotiate the employment contract for all TAs and GAs with New York State. Again, we represent and protect all GAs and TAs, domestic and international, and we make sure that your employer cannot take advantage of you, harass you, overwork you, discriminate against you, or unfairly dismiss you. GSEU is your voice and protection in the workplace.

In addition to engaging in collective contract bargaining and representation, GSEU materially improves the lives of TAs and GAs through a number of other measures. It is because we are unionized that as TAs and GAs we have good benefits such as health insurance, as well as dental and vision. GSEU is also the reason TAs and GAs enjoy a guaranteed raise of 2% in their salary every year. On top of that, your fellow GSEU

members secured thousands of dollars in raises for all TAs and GAs last fall through the Living Wage Campaign, and the fight for raises to grad worker wages will continue going forward. GSEU is also the reason behind Stony Brook University's fees scholarship, which every grad student in a terminal degree program now enjoys. This union win eliminated broad-based fees for TAs and GAs, saving each graduate worker approximately \$2,000 every year. Adding together these wage increases and the fees scholarship, the collective efforts of GSEU members have effectively raised the base stipend for TAs and GAs by around \$5,000 over the last two years alone. As the labor union for all TAs and GAs, GSEU has secured lots of material benefits for its members already, and we will continue this work to ensure that grad student

employees at Stony Brook can lead dignified lives.

But none of these efforts are possible without the active support of graduate workers, for GSEU is nothing more than its members. For the union to continue protecting our existing benefits and make even more gains in the future, TAs and GAs must fill out their union forms, become union members, and add their voices to those of their fellow workers. So, if you enjoy your raises, if you enjoy having health insurance, if you enjoy not having to pay thousands of dollars in fees out of your salary back to the university every year, and if you don't want to lose any of these benefits, reach out and become a signed GSEU member today. Without GSEU, grad workers would not have these benefits, and they would be at the behest of their employer.



Stony Brook GSEU Living Wage Campaign Organizers attending President McInnis's "Inequality in Higher Education" symposium on October 21, 2021

# STONY BROOK UNIVERSITY GRADUATE STUDENT EMPLOYEES UNION UPDATES

## The Stony Brook Worker Editorial

At present, our union encompasses and represents over 1,100 graduate workers here at Stony Brook University, with nearly two-thirds of them being signed union members.

This semester, the Graduate Student Employees Union continued to advocate for a living wage, to advance recruitment, and to support members in grievances and workplace issues. Our Living Wage Campaign continues with increased escalation. In order to get a better grasp of our members' financial situation and their problems, we conducted a financial evaluation survey. This survey, which will be shared on a regular basis, included the main questions from another financial evaluation survey that we shared with our members in the Spring 2021 semester. The results of the survey illustrate the grave issues that graduate workers are facing and the damaging effects of these issues on our mental health, research, and teaching.

Below are some of the striking results from our survey. We also included comparisons of our most recent survey with the one that was conducted last year. This comparison illustrates that graduate workers think their financial situation has not improved but has in fact worsened over the last year.

To date, 92% of graduate workers at Stony Brook do not think their stipends are enough to sustain themselves. This figure is up from 86.6% in 2021.

Virtually all graduate workers at Stony Brook do not think their stipend is "enough to live comfortably, and to focus on [one's] research, without financial worry and stress." When

asked about whether or not they believed their stipends were sufficient, 88.6% of the respondents answered, "No, not enough at all," which was the answer indicating the lowest level of satisfaction available for this question. An additional 10.2% answered the same question with "No, a little lower than what it should be." Overall, almost 99% of respondents answered this question in the negative in 2022. In the 2021 survey, 75.6% of respondents had answered the same question with "No, not enough at all," while 22.5% had answered, "No, a little lower than what it should be." This dynamic indicates that graduate workers' financial struggles have only increased over the last 12 months.

Moreover, 82% of graduate workers noted that they have encountered financial problems during their time at Stony Brook University. Only 8% answered maybe, and only 10% reported that they did not encounter any financial problems. In 2021, 78% had answered yes, while 13% had answered maybe, and 9% had answered no.

In another section of the most recent survey, 73% of graduate workers indicated that their research or teaching was impacted due to financial constraints. Only 18% answered maybe, and only 9% indicated that their research was not impacted by financial concerns. In 2021, 68.3% had answered yes, while 18.3% had answered maybe, and 13.3% said their research or teaching was not impacted.

Moreover, 80% of graduate workers noted that their mental health was impacted due to financial constraints. To this question, only 13% answered maybe, and only 7% stated that their

mental health was not impacted. In 2021, 73% had said their mental health was impacted due to financial reasons, while 15% had answered maybe, and 12% had signaled that their mental health was not impacted due to financial issues. These numbers reflect the same trend as the responses mentioned above. The financial situation for graduate workers and the impact of this situation on our mental health at Stony Brook has declined rather than improved.

When in 2021 we asked how graduate workers thought SBU's base stipend compared to a living wage, 90.3% said "very low compared to living wage." In the 2022 survey, 91% of graduate workers still feel the same way.

Lastly, when we asked graduate workers if they think that the "recent raises to graduate worker base stipends were enough to resolve [their] financial problems," 92% answered no, 5% said they were not sure, and only 3% answered yes.

These answers illustrate that we are still far away from providing a dignified and humane life for graduate workers at Stony Brook University. GSEU spent the spring semester amplifying the message that our wages are still starvation wages to all the departments across campus. We distributed posters and flyers through our mobilizer network, engaged in conversations with graduate workers, and discussed how to move forward with our campaign.

We also shared our messages with local and international media. Our struggles made an appearance in an article published by The Guardian in which we noted that some graduate workers at SBU have had to sell blood plasma just to get by and continue their studies.

In addition, we hosted an in-person action inside the administration building on April 23rd, which drew approximately 40 graduate workers and campus press. We shared a public statement (printed in this issue) and delivered a letter to President McInnis asking for an immediate implementation of a living wage for graduate

workers. For May Day, which is International Workers' Day, we will be holding another in-person action for our Living Wage Campaign.

In addition to working on the Living Wage Campaign, SBU GSEU organizers took part in a legislative campaign to eliminate broad-based fees across SUNY and CUNY. GSEU has worked in conjunction with our parent union CWA District 1 on the passage of NYS Senate Bill S4872B which would provide state-level funding to eliminate broad-based fees for all graduate workers. Even though we eliminated broad-based fees through GSEU activism (see our article in this issue about the history of this victory), many other SUNY campuses still have broad-based fees. Our organizers from SBU GSEU participated in lobbying efforts and made successful connections with state politicians. Our bill passed the one-house budget, but alas it was not included in the recent NYS budget by the Governor's Office.

The GSEU International Student Worker Committee also continued its advocacy this semester. The committee distributed flyers and posters explaining the legal rights of international students in joining our union and standing up for their protected rights. Committee organizers sought to challenge the reluctance amongst international students to become involved with GSEU, a reluctance that usually results from cultural and political differences or a lack of information on the rights of international students in the United States. GSEU also recently negotiated funding with New York State to cover the SEVIS fees for new international students. The SEVIS fee is a one-time fee that all international students pay starting their studies in the United States. We guided many of our international grad student members to get their SEVIS fees reimbursed through this initiative.

While GSEU represents all TAs and GAs at Stony Brook, many grad students also work as research assistants (RAs). RAs are also represented

by a labor union, the Research Assistants Union, which is currently being restructured and folded into the Education Division of our parent union, CWA 1104. In this context, members and leaders of GSEU and the RA Union have been reaching out to RAs across Stony Brook all semester long to inform them of these changes. And with nearly two-thirds of all RAs already having signed up, going forward the RA Union will be just as strong and robust in its representation of RAs as GSEU is for TAs and GAs.

Lastly, GSEU organizers were also active in the formation of a graduate student labor union at Fordham University. With the help of our organizers and GSEU statewide, Fordham graduate students have overwhelmingly voted to form their own union, and they are now part of CWA's educational division. A detailed account of the Fordham unionization struggle is also included in this issue.

## GSEU CAMPUS UPDATES

### The Stony Brook Worker Editorial

Stony Brook is just one of sixty-four institutions in the SUNY system—the largest state university system in the United States. Graduate workers across SUNY campuses face various forms of labor exploitation: poverty wages, unjustified fees, and a general lack of institutional support. We spoke to graduate worker representatives from GSEU chapters at SUNY Buffalo and SUNY Albany, as well as the SUNY GSEU At Large chapter (which represents sixteen SUNY



Stony Brook GSEU Living Wage Campaign Organizers on October 23, 2021.

Colleges), to learn about recent and current campaigns, difficulties, and victories.

#### SUNY Buffalo GSEU

Lawrence Mullen, President of Buffalo GSEU, told us that graduate workers at Buffalo won an initial fee abolition victory in June of 2021, when fees (including an international student fee) were waived for PhD students at the university. However, fees were not waived for master's students, nor for non-academic graduate workers. Current campaign focus has shifted toward implementing a graduate worker-wide fee waiver.

Graduate workers at Buffalo are also

campaigning to raise their stipend floor to \$22,000 annually. According to a survey conducted by Buffalo GSEU in the fall of 2021, about 1/3 of graduate workers make less than \$20,000, and a fourth make less than \$15,000.

In these struggles, Mullen says that the “biggest obstacle has of course been University administrators, who refused and continue to refuse to meet with GSEU leadership, because they view our explicit ‘ask’ as a demand to ‘negotiate.’” Nevertheless, graduate workers at SUNY Buffalo have continued to struggle and apply pressure to university administration in the Spring 2022 semester by passing out fliers at the university's

Undergraduate Admissions Day and organizing grade-ins and a Valentine's Day write-in.

#### SUNY Albany GSEU

At SUNY Albany, GSEU members are engaged in a similar struggle to ban fees for all graduate students and workers. Organizer Shirley Jin informed us that an extensive anti-fee campaign in the Fall 2021 semester, including a widely publicized campaign picket and rally on the university's Fall Preview Day, resulted in a raise of base stipends by \$1,000 and (beginning in Fall 2022) a fee scholarship.

However, just as in Buffalo, fee scholarships

have not meant fee abolition. Master's and non-academic graduate workers remain affected by exploitative fees. Jin notes that university administration is using this division between PhD students and other graduate workers to attempt to create tension within the union.

The struggle to abolish fees for all graduate workers at SUNY Albany continues. Jin says: "We see the campaign result as a step forward, not an end game. There is more work to do to make fee abolition a reality. However, we will never back down until we make it a reality. We will relaunch the campaign in the fall."

#### SUNY GSEU At Large

The GSEU At Large chapter represents graduate assistants at sixteen SUNY colleges and medical schools, collectively referred to as "Colleges." The situation at SUNY Colleges differs from that of SUNY universities, with fees remaining in place and even lower stipends. Rose Osborne, business agent for the At Large chapter, informed us that most Colleges graduate workers make less than half of the cost of living (even before the recent spike in inflation) and that half of SUNY Colleges pay graduate workers less than state minimum wage. Fifteen percent of graduate assistants are ineligible for health benefits due to a policy that grants benefits only to workers making more than \$4,293 per year. Pandemic-related cuts have also impacted job security and bargaining power.

Furthermore, Colleges graduate workers continue to be required to pay hundreds of dollars in fees every semester. Rose told us that SUNY Colleges face unique struggles in their anti-fee campaign: "[the] campus-by-campus approach is much less effective for Colleges grads spread out over 16 campuses and dealing with 16 different administrations. We admire the incredible strides our University Center comrades have taken

towards ending fees, but Colleges grads have not seen any movement on fees and are still fighting. The statewide anti-fees campaign is far from over."

At the College of Environmental Science and Forestry (ESF) in Syracuse, a campaign is ongoing to push back deadlines for fees, which are currently set in August, weeks before the first fall paychecks are sent out. This situation puts significant financial strain on graduate assistants at ESF, but administration thus far has been unsympathetic. Rose says "changing the fees deadline would cost ESF nothing, and we know other campuses like Stony Brook do not assess fees until mid-semester. But ESF administrators refuse to work with us on this straight-forward issue." Attempts by GSEU At Large to present and discuss this issue with administrators have repeatedly been ignored, but members continue to organize and agitate, and are again asking to speak with the board this May about the issue. Meanwhile, other victories have been won at ESF, including a \$2,000 raise for graduate assistants and an additional \$2,000 raise coming into place Fall 2022. These necessary raises, however, remain a drop in the bucket: stipends for PhD students will rise only to \$18,000, and master's stipends to \$16,000—well below the cost of living in Syracuse (\$32,500 for a single childless adult).

GSEU At Large has also been working with members at their campuses to hold faculty accountable for mistreating graduate workers, and, during the pandemic, the chapter distributed KN95 masks to graduate workers. They have also taken action to give Colleges graduate assistants in SUNY governance, attending SUNY Board of Trustees meetings, campus-level administrative hiring committees, and GSA meetings.

## GSEU STATEMENT ON LIVING WAGE

by SBU GSEU



Stony Brook GSEU Living Wage Campaign Organizers on April 21, 2022.

*The following section is a transcript of the public statement we made on our living wage action on April 21, 2022, in the administration building.*

"Today, we are united to amplify our voices for our Living Wage Campaign. I would like to initially thank everyone who is here to support us, including SB Press and the Statesman for coming. It's been almost a year since we began our Living Wage Campaign. We have support from not only all the labor unions on this campus, but also the Graduate Student Organization, who represents all graduate students, as well as support from a wide range of undergraduate organizations.

Our campaign petition has almost a thousand signatures. It is clear that everyone on this campus realizes our struggle and believes we deserve to earn a living wage. Everyone, that is, except the administration, who has so far failed to provide us with any meaningful change and forces us to live below the extreme poverty level as defined by official federal numbers of the US Department of Housing and Urban Development.

We do not accept our living and working conditions. We are working in a 3 billion dollar university, located in one of the richest states in the wealthiest country in the world. New York State has an economy larger than most countries.

Yet, in the flagship university of such a state, the workers that do the majority of the instructional labor, workers without which this university is nothing, live beyond extreme poverty level. This is an inexcusable, abominable state of affairs. We are not faced here with a lack of resources, nor a system that at least tries its best to find a way to pay us. We are facing blatant exploitation, inequality, and injustice.

Every time we raise our voices that we want a human life, a life deserving of a human being with dignity, comfort, and happiness, we are faced with the discourse of budgetary limitations from the administration. Need I remind you, though, that this is exactly what we were hearing before our fee strike, exactly what we were hearing before we brought all labor unions on campus together for our rally last semester. However, it was after our collective actions, we eliminated our fees and won \$2,500 raises to our stipends. Is it a coincidence that each time we unite and show our power,

suddenly, out of thin air, funds for us appear to exist? The answer lies in the simplest rule of workers' struggle, a rule that history has proven countless times, that when workers unite they can always achieve what appears unachievable, what is told to them to be impossible, precisely because these things are deemed impossible to protect the level of exploitation from which the employers benefit. This is a lesson generations of struggling workers have learned—when we won our health insurance, when we won weekends, when we won the 8-hour work day, and this is a lesson that we will show again here when we earn our living wage.

Graduate workers are hungry; they sell their blood plasma to get by. The analogy of capital to a vampire has taken such a tragic reality here at Stony Brook that even the authors of this analogy would be surprised by it. When you tell us that you do not have money to give us a wage even at the level of extreme poverty, what is it that you are telling us other than that the premise of this

university is based on our poverty, our misery, and our exploitation? Three-fourths of graduate workers face mental health problems because of their financial struggles. 92% of graduate workers do not think their stipends are enough to sustain themselves. Each time you tell us about a lack of funds, if we were to believe you, what we hear is that the university you run is grounded on our exploitation, your acceptance that you arranged your budget such that you cannot run this university any other way than on the backs of the majority of your instructional labor living below the extreme poverty level. We reject such a university.

We will not hear any more of how you are rounding up the numbers, how you are strategically planning your budget. Our lives are more important than rounding figures and commas in an Excel sheet. We will no longer be patient when you are constructing your committees that go nowhere nor take with good conscience your empty words

and promises and messages of care. Promises have meaning only when they are followed consistently by meaningful actions, and when these actions are taken out of one's own initiative, not after a long struggle that demands those actions and creates a situation wherein not taking that action produces more negative results to the university and your reputation. Most importantly, we do not and will not find meaningful any change that does not afford us a living wage.

We will keep our fight for a living wage until we succeed. It is undeniable that what we are facing is exploitation and injustice. We learned how to resist, and we will learn how to win. We will make sure with all our sources that everyone knows the conditions of graduate workers at Stony Brook. We will no longer sugarcoat our exploitation. If anyone is planning to come to Stony Brook university as a graduate worker, know this: you will most likely suffer mental health issues. You will most likely not be able to fully devote yourself to your research. You will most likely not think you are living a comfortable life deserving of a human being. This will all be because of the level of your stipend. This is what we heard from graduate workers hundreds of times over countless years.

At Stony Brook here, we will continue our struggle until our demands are met. We won't stop until the real conditions that make possible the flagship university of the SUNY system is known all around. We do not wish to be in luxury, we do not wish to live in riches. We believe everyone deserves safe and decent housing, a healthy diet, that everyone deserves to not be agonized each time they are paying for groceries, living with the weight of the worry of how they can continue to exist financially. These we see as our rights and we will get them with our unified power and will. Our struggle is only starting and will only escalate! Power and justice to grad workers!"



Stony Brook GSEU Living Wage Campaign Organizers on April 21, 2022.





## LABOR STRUGGLES AT STONY BROOK UNIVERSITY

by SBU GSEU

As GSEU, we aim to help bring together all the struggles and labor issues on our campus. With this purpose, the Stony Brook Worker staff talked to the leaders of all the labor unions on campus. In this article, we present their active struggles, the problems they are facing, and their visions of solidarity and change at Stony Brook University.

United University Professions —  
Center Campus

We spoke with Andrew Solar-Greco, who currently serves as the president of the United University Professions (UUP) main campus chapter at SBU. UUP is the faculty and staff union for SUNY and has 32 chapters throughout the state. They represent tenured and non-tenured faculty, adjunct lecturers, as well as administrative professional staff, who typically have a bachelor's degree or more. At Stony Brook, UUP has 2,700 workers in the bargaining unit, with an additional 400 retired or emeritus workers. With an approximate 87% overall membership rate and a 95% membership rate for full-time faculty and staff, they represent a formidable and committed body of workers. Counting all UUP members statewide,

Rally for Respect and Fair Wages on November 17, 2021  
hosted by SBU Labor Council consisting of all unions across  
Stony Brook University campus.

they are the largest higher education union in the United States.

When asked about UUP's recent campaigns and actions, Solar-Greco highlighted the recent recruitment and membership expansion efforts in light of the upcoming contract negotiations set to begin after the current UUP contract expires on July 1 of this year: "We've been doing kind of membership drives to try to knock on doors and connect with members. We've also been trying to speak to members about issues around our contract. We're trying to connect with members and connect them to the organizing work we want to do around the contract. We really want to overall try to find a way to better engage our members, especially after Janus. We recognize the need for having intentional one-on-one conversations."

In addition to these efforts, UUP has been engaged in campaigns that are related to health and safety concerns emerging from the pandemic. Solar-Greco emphasized the group's recent efforts to increase remote work opportunities: "We've also done organizing around tele-commuting, to make sure our members have the maximum telecommuting that they're allowed per the SUNY tele-commuting policy. In the past, mostly last year, we did a lot of education around vaccination, vaccine hesitancy, trying to help members understand vaccination and the benefits to that. We've advocated for and won a mask mandate during the Delta surge. And we tried to maintain the mask mandate on campus as long as possible amidst the Omicron surge."

Currently, UUP is addressing a number of issues that their members would like to see included in the contract negotiations, such as current wage levels, hostile work environments and toxic supervisors, and a lack of common dignity and respect. Solar-Greco noted that in the next contract UUP would like to see higher wages and address the high cost of living with an increased location pay stipend.

In order to build power for the new contract negotiations, Solar-Greco emphasized the need to mobilize members: "We want to think about how we can effectively win a good contract. To win a good contract, we need our members to engage in actions in the workplace and informational pickets and all kinds of organizing. And most importantly, do smaller actions and smaller scale things to build member confidence, so they are willing and able and capable of having the confidence and overcoming the fear. That [fear] can be 'Ooh, can I really hold the sign outside? Can I really confront my supervisor?' We recognize that we're a collective bargaining agent, we have a collective bargaining agreement. But if we want to improve that and we want to improve our work lives, we need to engage in collective action."

When asked about what he considers to be the best way to mobilize members, Solar-Greco pointed toward finding issues that are important to them during one-on-one conversations. He emphasized that blanket calls for actions depend on these one-on-one interactions to be effective and for workers to take the time to be involved in direct actions. "That's a lot of work, but there's no shortcuts," he continued, while also accentuating the importance of department representatives who can spread the union's messages in their departments. "You have to have conversations, you have to do that educational work, and it takes time and it takes a lot of work, but there's no shortcuts. We can't just jump to the end goal, to the conclusion we want. Even if we are so angry and frustrated around some sort of issue, that's something that I have to, as chapter president, think about. Do we have the ability? Sure we could do it, but how many people are going to show up? Is it going to be effective?"

Decentralized member empowerment is a key strategy that UUP actively tries to develop. Solar-Greco talked about the common issues that both GSEU and UUP members face as academic

workers in our university. Members of both unions are experiencing issues that result from overwork and increased class sizes. When we asked how these issues can be resolved, Solar-Greco pointed out the need for more state funding and new hires. However, he noted that, until we reach that point, we need to increase department-level mobilization, and we need for workers to be more vocal about these problems: "It's not enough for us to just cape in like superheroes and try to solve the problem. We can't go into departments and tell members, 'Hey, you can do this. This is a given.' The members have to want to do that work. The members have to have the confidence to do that work. This is a decentralized model, this is an empowering members model."

In the upcoming contract negotiations, one of the most important priorities for UUP are contingent faculty. Solar-Greco discussed the ongoing trend of adjunctification in academia and how UUP tries to challenge this issue at SBU. The key to the issue, he noted, is the attempt by university administrations to increase profits and to have the ability to hire and fire people easily. An adjunct instructor can be hired to teach the same course load for \$8,000 without benefits, as compared to a tenured faculty member who would be earning at least \$70,000.

UUP has fought for adjuncts for a long time and has won health insurance eligibility for adjuncts who teach at least six credits. They want to extend this benefit to those who teach three credits as well. Beyond this, they are fighting for better working conditions for contingent faculty, such as longer appointments, higher wages, better job security, and increased opportunities for promotion and advancement. As Solar-Greco put it, "We want to see promotional opportunities, so if someone's been an adjunct for three semesters, maybe they can go from being an assistant adjunct professor to an associate adjunct professor, and with that

comes additional compensation." UUP seeks to improve adjunct conditions to come as close as possible to those enjoyed by faculty on tenured lines, with clear opportunities to advance into tenure. These issues, Solar-Greco emphasized, are going to be one of the major priorities in the upcoming negotiations.

The job insecurity that contingent faculty face also constitutes a barrier to organizing for many members. Solar-Greco gave a message to those who are in this position: "I would say stay strong. We have your back, but again, it's not enough. We're not here to cape in like a superhero. We can't solve all the problems, we need you to help us do this work, because this is your union. It's not just me, it's not just the leadership, it's not just the activists. We have all these opportunities to work together. Our union was founded by members. It continues to be run exclusively by members. We have [...] officers who are contingent and adjuncts, and who understand the grind. [They] are helping with this work and this advocacy and so much more. But we need you, we need you within your department. If people are afraid of speaking out, of course, you could speak to just us in confidence, but labor activities are protected by state and federal law. We would fight for our members' rights to engage in this conversation. I would implore you as well to look at other higher education workers. They're rising up and they're defending their rights and they're fighting for their conditions and they're winning, so if we want to see improvements, we need to have collective action and collective participation in all of this. It can't just be a few people advocating behind closed doors."

Next, Solar-Greco talked about the future of labor solidarity at SBU and how to facilitate communication and cooperation between all the unions on campus. He noted that UUP members work alongside GSEU and members of the Civil Service Employees Association (CSEA) both in



Rally for Respect and Fair Wages on November 17, 2021

and outside of the classroom. Solar-Greco then continued to say that our shared Labor Council would be a great start to initiate conversations between different workers, as well as to develop relationships between union leaders. In this effort to grow cooperation and solidarity, involving non-union stakeholders like the Graduate Student Organization (GSO) or Undergraduate Student Government (USG) could be valuable. In addition, we should also increase our connections with the wider Long Island community, for example, through the Long Island Federation of Labor. This, Solar-Greco noted, would be an effective way to raise awareness about our struggles and to develop public support.

In closing, Solar-Greco again emphasized the need for mobilization and autonomous action: “You are an agent of change, right? We are the ones we’ve been waiting for. Leadership is doing the best we can, but it’s never going to be enough. We need all of our members to find a role, to become active, to approach their leaders and say, what can I do to help our union, to recognize that members themselves are an agent of change and are needed for that because management has a lot of power. They have the structures of the entire university at their disposal. All we have is each other, and that’s what makes us a union. And we have to recognize that we are the union and that we are the ones we’ve been waiting for. We can’t

count on just leaders to get the job done. We all have a role to play, even if it’s small. It might be as simple as just wearing a UUP button, or a GSEU button, or whatever button around the workplace to let everyone know that you’re a member and you care. Serve as a department representative, or become active in committees. Just find some way to give back to our union. At the bare minimum, everyone needs to pay dues, everyone needs to be a member. But beyond that, if we want to be stronger, if we want things to get better, we all have to take time out of our day, to serve our collective benefit.”

Civil Service Employees Association:

From the Civil Service Employees Association (CSEA), SBW interviewed Carlos Speight who currently serves as president of the union’s Stony Brook University chapter. CSEA represents almost 3,000 members in our university from three different bargaining units. Their operational unit includes maintenance and cleaning workers. Their administrative unit includes clerical support workers. And their institutional unit consists of workers in assistant capacities at the hospital and in nursing, transportation, and other similar positions in the healthcare industry. Beyond the local chapter at SBU, CSEA represents over 260,000 members from school districts, local governments, and some private industries. Their parent union, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) is the largest trade union in the US with over 1.3 million members nationwide.

Recently, CSEA has been working on their campaign for hazard duty pay. They had a labor coalition protest last summer outside the SBU hospital with participation from 1199 South Hampton Hospital, PEF, and UUP-HSC. Speight emphasized that even though their members receive overtime payment, they want the

dangerous conditions that healthcare workers face due to the pandemic to be recognized in a more institutional way: “We have been the backbone of Long Island and we serve all the communities in Long Island. We also had the Labor Coalition rally with you folks in November. So we try to keep it strong. That’s the only way we can make our voices heard, if we rally. It’s hard to do it through Zoom, or articles; it’s stronger if we are together and people see us as one.”

Speight emphasized that CSEA is continuing this struggle for hazard pay both on the grievance and political fronts. They are also advancing their efforts to attain a more respectful work environment. To that end, the union plans to organize a rally in the near future that, according to Speight, will focus on the “respect issue and more of a class segregation, as far as working class. They are not respecting the working class of this union, of the employees, the workforce. Managers are not respecting the collective bargaining agreement that we have between the CSEA and NYS.” He noted that the administration treats their contract as if it were something optional rather than as a binding, legal contract. Many of the issues CSEA has to confront arises from this disregard of the contract and disrespect towards the workers.

Speight continued that they will reinforce the contract and challenge this attitude towards collective action, adding that “it’s more of a class system, it’s a respect thing; that’s always been our challenge. We have to put it, whether they can swallow it or not. We have to let them know, that’s what it is. We are the majority and you are not respecting us, so it has to be a class system. We’re going to make them know.”

Arriving at this point, Speight said that they have exhausted the basic grievance processes without attaining the desired changes and development. As a result, Speight asserts that “we need to put teeth in the grievance process”

through public rallies and direct action. Speight further remarked that there is an inequality in how the legal proceedings work when there is a case against a worker versus when there is a grievance case based on the violation of a labor contract. When there is a disciplinary process that involves a worker being charged with misconduct, the process is notably more efficient and faster than the grievance processes. As Speight puts it, “The grievance process, violation of the contract, kind of put in the backburner, and we need to have them expedite them just as quickly, if not quicker. There needs to be a cease and desist order, you shouldn’t go through the same grievance process for everything. Like when there is a breach of overtime issue, I shouldn’t have to go through the 1,2,3,4 steps of the grievance process. It should be that one step that says who they violated, then that’s a cease and desist. That’s the issue with the grievance process.”

Speight encouraged everyone in the community to come out in support to help their upcoming action. He noted that it will not be the leadership of our unions that will cause the changes we would like to see but rather the workers must shape their own struggle with their own hands: “We need to assure the members that they are the ones that’s going to make the change, not a president, not the chapter president. I can speak for you, but only me outside, I can’t rally for you. Once they see how many members are backing that leader, then your voices are behind us, you hold a lot of weight.” This power increases more when workers from other unions take part in each other’s actions, showing that we all have similar struggles and that we are not alone in our fight.

Increasing labor solidarity is therefore imperative, Speight continued, and to further this solidarity, we need to build our Labor Council into a more active force: “In this society today I don’t think much people care about each

other’s struggles, until they have an issue. That’s something that all of us leaders should work on, what’s going on, what management is doing to this particular union versus that one. So, that’s very important, to know that they are not alone in this struggle. That falls on me as a leader to inform them of what’s going on.” Speight also added that we need to develop our Labor Council to increase the power of all the workers at SBU. This deepened solidarity can come through improved communication, facilitated by, for example, more frequent meetings or a joint newsletter. “There are many things happening on campus I don’t pay that much attention to, but it is major to you folks, major to UUP, that affects you. So we need to be more attuned to what is going on with each other’s struggle.”

CSEA is currently going through their new contract negotiations. Even though Speight said that during the negotiations, the contract team has a blackout period in which not all the information can be shared publicly, he was able to enumerate some of the important goals CSEA is pursuing. Firstly, CSEA is trying to increase the wage level to accommodate the cost of living increase in Suffolk County. Speight noted that they are pursuing an increased downstate location pay, which currently stands at \$3,000. CSEA wants this downstate pay to be increased to the range of \$8,000 to 10,000 in the next contract.

They are also pursuing increased yearly raises: “We want significant raises. We don’t want 2%, 2.5%--we don’t think that’s respectable. This is LI, we need to have cost of living and food and produce, oil, gas, we need to have at least a cost of living at 3.3% each year, at the very least, four years, 14% raise. That’s showing respect.”

Another improvement that CSEA would like to see in the next contract is increased tuition reimbursement. Speight also emphasized the need for special duty and assignment pay for their workers at the administrative unit. This pay is

especially needed because of problems with short staffing that these workers are facing. Additionally, members in this unit would like to see upgraded civil service titles.

Next, we mentioned to Speight that we think our respective members usually do not have many opportunities to connect with each other and develop better relationships, and we discussed ways to ameliorate this situation. Speight noted that “it starts with us leaders; we have to develop communication among ourselves and from ourselves it can branch to our membership. A coalition website, or Facebook, that people can look at what’s going on and put their comments in.”

He mentioned an online blog created by a CSEA member that has over 2500 subscribers and serves as a platform through which workers can connect. Speight thinks that developing similar initiatives can further our solidarity significantly: “That’s something we can do, as far as a labor coalition of Stony Brook page, and have the list of all the unions participate in it. I think that in itself would amaze our members. To list all the unions in Stony Brook, bring up hot topics and things like that, but it definitely starts with us leaders, to make that first move, build our coalition consistently and then we can branch it out to membership.”

Speight concluded his remarks by saying, “Keep the faith, we will travel the road together, and we can’t leave anybody behind. And in order to be successful, we all need to trek the road at the same pace, one for one is one for all, that’s how we have to look at it, we represent we, not me.”

#### United University Professions — Health Sciences Chapter

Lastly, SBW talked with Bruce Kube from the United University Professions Health

Sciences Chapter (UUP-HSC). UUP-HSC is the part of UUP that represents the faculty and professional staff in the hospital, the health science center, and the dental school. They have members in Southampton, the technology park in Setauket, and the specialty practice building in Commack. Their members work in these locations in various positions, from the clerical staff to neurosurgeons, academic professors, and support staff of the school of health and the dental school.

Regarding UUP-HSC’s recent campaigns, Kube said that they have been focused on the effort to get more funding for SUNY and for teaching hospitals. He noted that “SUNY and the hospitals are underfunded, and it runs into all sorts of deficiencies in programs in terms of staffing, workload creep. There’s a lot of tangential effects that lack of funding has...and of course the hospitals. I believe that the funding to the hospitals is critically harming the services that they’re able to provide, particularly, you know, now during the pandemic.” In this advocacy, Kube noted that they spent a lot of time in the first quarter of the year talking with legislators, expressing the need not only for SUNY as a whole but also for more funding for EOP and EOC programs, which are equal opportunity programs directed at students from underserved and underrepresented areas.

As for the daily struggles and issues UUP-HSC members face, Kube highlighted the issue of workload: “I think you probably see the same thing with the graduate students: do more with less. So, a department loses four people, they lose three people, so they have one person left doing the whole thing, and the management take on that is, okay, well, it’s the same job so it shouldn’t be a problem, even though the volume has increased to fourfold. And they don’t get that, we have a hard time getting that through to management.”

In challenging this issue, Kube mentioned that they are educating their members on their rights and on how to approach the issue from an advocacy standpoint. He emphasized that workers need to advocate for themselves first, and the union can always step in after they face an obstacle and communication with the administration is required. One issue that makes this a problem, according to Kube, is that some members do not “necessarily see the value of the union until they have a problem. And then, you know, we become the saviors of the be-all end-all and they expect us to be able to do things. My big thing is really trying to get communication out there, two-way communication, so that I know what’s going on because with 5,000 members, we’re all over the place.”

There are different solutions to the problem of workload that UUP-HSC suggests. Kube remarked that more funding would allow for more hires and for the workload to be more evenly distributed. More compensation for increased workload would be another preferable development. However, workers also need to protect the quality of their work, Kube continued: “There comes a point where you’re going to hit a wall, and no matter you can do everything, the end product is not going to be very good. So, it’s quality versus quantity and what do you want? We have to impress on our members that they need to stand by the quality of their work and argue with management that, yeah, I could maybe do this, but the time spent and the effort spent is going to be diluted because that’s just more than I can handle at that level on a regular basis.”

UUP-HSC members, just by virtue of work location, tend to be more isolated from members of the other unions. We recognized that this isolation hampers our solidarity, and Kube pointed towards the need to further our communication and joint actions. He noted that our unions might face similar problems but reach

solutions that will be applicable to each other’s contexts even though the contexts are different. We agreed that a developed Labor Council would be a significant step toward that kind of solidarity.

Kube continued with a discussion of the issue of recruitment and the importance of becoming a member of our respective unions. He mentioned two significant issues that GSEU also faces: difficulty in reaching unsigned members of our unit and reluctance to join the union in cases of short-term appointments. He shared a message to any unsigned members about the importance of joining a union: “Well, in my opinion, when you have a union you’re not out there alone. Without the union, it’s you against management; with the union, you have resources, you have people standing behind you to prop you up to help you through, whatever the case may be, protect your rights. A lot of times, management will sometimes, well, either intentionally or unintentionally violate the rights of our members because the management isn’t necessarily well versed in our contract. So we have to make sure that the rights of our members are protected and, first and foremost, that’s my responsibility. I take that very seriously.”

In many cases, he added, when the union becomes involved, issues that workers face are resolved immediately. This efficacy makes an impression on workers and can help a movement to grow. However, we can never know when such instances will appear and we must be ready to stand by our members at any time.

Next, Kube offered his perspectives on creating a more united labor front at SBU. He drew our attention to the Taylor Law, which prohibits job actions like a strike for unionized workplaces. He continued: “that kind of limits our hammer more or less to informational picketing and things along those lines. And I think that may be a tool that we’ll need to pull out, and certainly in any demonstration, the more individuals you have, the more powerful the demonstration is. So, you

know, we need to be able to count on each other to mobilize into each other’s causes as they present themselves.”

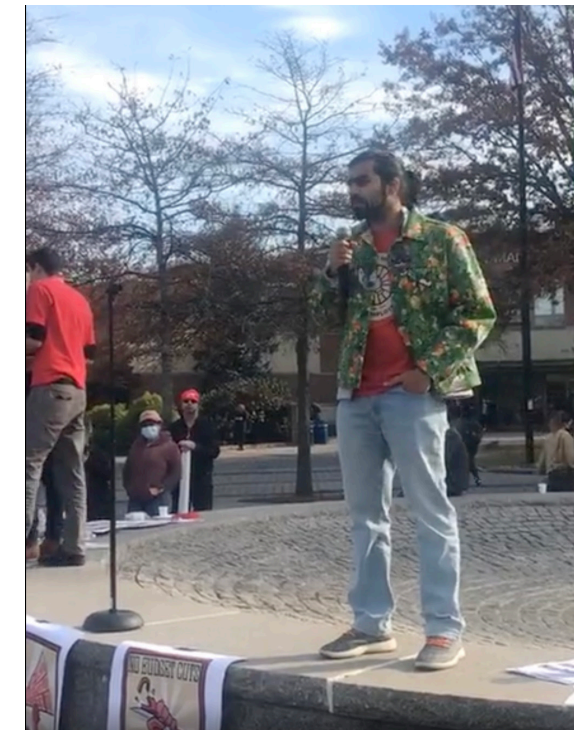
To increase the power of labor on our campus, Kube emphasized the importance of talking up the union. He encouraged everyone to be vocal in their support of their respective unions in everyday interactions and conversations. Moreover, we should recognize that we have a coalition of unions from which we can gather power: “We have this unit that we can draw from for advice, for support, if we need it. If we do need help, we know that there’s somebody out there that we can depend on to come in and help us out with something, whatever the case may be and vice versa.”

In closing, Kube affirmed the historical importance of labor unions for our society and workplaces: “I believe that unions are valuable in society. They serve a very important role, and without the benefit of unions we would all be so much worse off. Thank God for the unions for weekends, 40-hour work weeks, benefits, all those things that unions were able to get into the workplace.”

#### Concluding Remarks from the Editors

We were lucky and honored to have the opportunity to have conversations with all these labor leaders at our campus. Our conversations highlight many overlapping issues that we all face, such as funding, workload, short staffing, cost of living, and job security. Everyone also pointed out the need for a larger coalition of labor at our campus. As GSEU, we believe that a new future of strong labor solidarity is starting at SBU.

Our power, though, will be determined by the vigilance and mobilization of all workers. We would like to conclude this piece with a message to any worker on our campus, whether you are a grad worker; faculty or staff member; maintenance or



Rally for Respect and Fair Wages on November 17, 2021.

cleaning worker; clerical support; doctor or faculty at the hospital; or any of the other positions we cannot name: be a part of our struggles, join your unions, encourage your colleagues to do the same, follow others’ issues, mobilize your workplaces against violations and hardships! Every small action, even just an everyday conversation, when engaged by the majority, which is us workers, will eventually develop to the power for us to construct a just university where we have a say, where we can determine our own working conditions, and where we can create a future in which we have the dignified lives all human beings deserve!

# INTERVIEW WITH LONG ISLAND FEDERATION OF LABOR

by SBU GSEU

The Long Island Federation of Labor is one of the leading labor councils in our community. They are associated with the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), and as a regional central labor council operating on Long Island they represent 250,000 workers ranging from teachers, technicians, painters, bus drivers, and brick layers to workers in retail, automotive, janitorial, utility, healthcare, construction, higher education, and public employees. GSEU actively engages in coalition building and solidarity among all working people, so we wanted to hear from the Long Island Federation of Labor about their struggles for the first issue of *The Stony Brook Worker*. We talked with Ryan Stanton, who currently serves as the executive director of Long Island Federation of Labor. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

SBW: Can you talk to us about your recent past campaigns or actions? I'm sure there are many since you represent so many different industries.

RS: Yeah. So I guess, campaigns is a very broad term and the role that we play in supporting our affiliates is one that's all encompassing and comprehensive. We support affiliate campaigns to organize. We also support affiliate legislative campaigns, and we run political and electoral campaigns to support candidates that support working people. It's April 13th as of this recording, and, we're just a few days removed from a New York state budget that was adopted, an agreement was reached between the governor, and the two

chambers within the state legislature. There were significant victories in that. And obviously there were also several things where we came up a little bit short, but keeping things on a positive tone, just something that broadly as Long Islanders, and working people we should care about is the environmental bond act. Environmental bond act has a variety of labor standards and things like buy American provisions in it that will ensure folks don't have to choose between a clean and a healthy economy but that those two are inextricably linked. Because of the labor standards, the strong labor standards that were secured by the state AFL-CIO, their affiliates, working with the central labor councils throughout the state on the ground and our affiliates, we're in a good position to have a conversation with our members about why it's important and, and the type of initiatives the environmental bond act can support.

There's also the offshore wind industry, it's another thing that we've done a lot of work on in the recent years. It's really an emerging industry with tremendous potential. We have traditional fossil fuel jobs that as a result of the CLCPA, the Climate Leadership Community Protection Act, are going to be pretty much written out of existence. We have to adopt new technologies to ensure the workers in that industry are able to continue doing work that is comparable to what they do now. There's potential growth in that area, offshore wind is another area where there's some potential. There's a lot of labor standards that are included in the procurement process and there's been a lot of good commitments by the developers in that community to ensure that the

jobs coming online as these utility sector jobs are being displaced are going to be good union jobs. Those are just some of the policies in the industries that we've been focused on broadly.

SBW: That sounds really interesting, congratulations on those wins!

RS: Thank you. I do think it's probably important to mention it's been a lot of significant high profile organizing victories. We're in the midst of ballots being out right now on several Starbucks stores here on Long Island. So workers are voting as we speak, Worker's United the New York, New Jersey regional joint board is the union that is working with those workers to have a voice in the workplace. Worker's United nationally has been very successful with the movement to organize Starbucks workers, at least going public for the first time and, and successful in Buffalo, New York. So that was pretty significant for our union movement here in New York state.

Just bringing it home and bringing it back to Long Island, Local 338 RWDSU John Durso was the president of that local. He also happens to be the president of the Long Island Federation, labor and his local union organized the first unit of farm workers who pinned our vineyards here on Long Island. For anyone reading, once we have a first contract there and even in the interim, it's good for folks that have an interest in supporting union workers and good wages and benefits to make sure that not only Pindar, but the workers there know that they're not alone and we're here to support them. So those are some of the campuses across the region, across the state campaigns that we've been involved in as of late.

After learning about their campaigns, SBW asked Ryan about the principles of organizing, tactics, and strategies that they use in their struggles, and what we can learn from that, especially in the aftermath of the Janus decision in 2018. In this

case, *Janus v. AFSCME*, the US Supreme Court decided that public sector employees do not have to sign their union cards to become a dues-paying member of their unions while still being able to reap the benefits they derive from union representation and collective bargaining.

RS: I hate to use a cliché here, but they become clichés because they're often relevant. You never have to get back to basics if you stay there, right? And for folks that continue on a daily basis to practice the fundamentals of organizing and touching base with workers and having organizing committees and discussions and feedback, and having a really truly worker led movement, will always be in a good place. This perhaps is a little bit controversial but Janus arguably put the union movement in a good place because it allows us to on a daily basis engage with our membership and constantly be having that conversation. So while it was brought forward by folks that wish to undermine our movement and wish to undermine workers' rights and dignity and respect in the workplace, I think it's really delivered a tremendous opportunity.

I know that doesn't answer the question about, you know, best practices or tips for organizing. But I think the answer to that is being engaged with workers and asking them what they want. I think we've learned through a lot of the recent campaigns, folks that maybe have been doing organizing for a long time are now hearing things from workers, whether it's in Starbucks or REI in New York city, or anywhere else, requests and priorities in a first contract that, the organizers have never heard before.

I was having this conversation very recently with one of the locals that was engaged in an organizing campaign. And that seemed to be a recurring theme among the worker led committee, was just sort of occasionally a shock and it's become less, less shocking as maybe some of the

same things related to work and conditions have come up.

SBW: You seem to be pretty optimistic about the direction of the labor movement in New York, or maybe in the US in general with Starbucks and the recent Amazon victory. Where do you think that as a union that represents such a big AFL-CIO, of course, one of the biggest unions in the country and represents a huge membership. What are your hopes and expectations from where the labor is going in New York?

RS: My expectation is that workers, whether it's to be AFL CIO, or some entity that, whether it's one of our affiliates, are always going to, organize themselves in a manner that, when conditions become bad enough, are willing to fight back, push back and, insist that they have a place in the workplace. Working people have been through tremendous hardship in the last two

years. My predecessor said this, in an on the record interview, I believe back in January, but one of the things that I think working people learned is that it didn't matter how hard you worked. There was no guarantee of respect or security or dignity in the workplace. You know, many employers responded and met the moment and were good employers, but many did not, and many exploited their workforce and took every opportunity to continue to enrich themselves at the expense of others and had a complete disregard for anyone else's wellbeing, specifically to bring in additional profits.

People literally died and I think enough working people took notice and out of this unthinkable tragedy, right, at one time, this was unthinkable, you know, here we are two years later, there's tremendous hope and opportunity for workers to take stock of where we are and insist on a better life for ourselves is I think where this could take us.

## WELCOME COMRADES! FORDHAM GRADUATE STUDENT WORKERS JOIN CWA LOCAL 1104

by Mae Saslaw

This spring, graduate workers at Fordham University won their union by an overwhelming margin of 229-15. They join the SUNY Graduate Student Employees Union (GSEU) and Research Assistants Union (RAU) as members of Communications Workers of America (CWA) Local 1104, and we are thrilled to welcome our comrades. Along with GSEU organizers Amy Kahng (GSEU-SBU) and Andrey Darovskih (GSEU-Binghamton), I had the opportunity to work with the Fordham Graduate Student Workers (FGSW) Organizing Committee and experience the formation of an academic labor union.

Their efforts began long before my involvement; I was hired on as the organizing committee grew and quietly gathered support among their colleagues. Full time staff leaders at CWA provided context and examples from previous unionization campaigns—Amy Solar-Greco, Erin Mahoney, and Maddox Wolfe worked together to win a union at the Audubon Society, and their insights from both CWA's established process and very recent experience set the tone for a methodical, successful campaign. I shared the story of GSEU's success with our Fee Strike campaign at Stony Brook, how a small group of organizers brought an end to student fees, which were thought to be an institutional inevitability. I described our ongoing Living Wage Campaign as an example of how an organized grad worker presence can affect change beyond our union contracts; the stipend increases many SBU TAs

received last fall are the result of our collective power. The organizing committee also heard from Fordham Faculty United (FFU), the union of adjunct faculty formed in 2017. Their success set a precedent for academic labor at Fordham, and their vocal support bolstered the FGSW campaign. Those of us who are new organizers have everything to gain from the experiences and victories of others, the lessons they teach us and the possibilities before us.

The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) requires 30% of the workers to sign on in support of forming a union before a filing and an election may proceed, and CWA sets a higher goal of 70% before filing to ensure better chances of success. In most workplaces, it is clear who falls in or out of the bargaining unit, a term used to describe the group of workers who will be represented by the new union. The organizing committees are usually composed of people from every branch or department. For graduate workers, however, this definition is more complex because of our varied funding sources. As we know, the precarity of funding is a source of job-related stress, and the disparities between stipends across academic departments is a source of inequity. Many of us also experience isolation within our departments and difficulty connecting to grad workers with different backgrounds despite our common struggles. As one of the FGSW organizers Ciarán Coyle put it, "the tendencies of academic work promote intense atomization and the drive for professionalization in our programs would have



Fordham Graduate Student Workers (FGSW) after winning their unionization election on April 7, 2022.  
Photo credit: Amanda Esau.

us principally interact with each other around our research as a kind of networking.”

In order to gather support for their new union, FGSW had the arduous task of compiling lists of grad workers and their titles, which served as an approximate full list of their bargaining unit members, and then reach out to perfect strangers to hear their workplace issues and gauge their level of commitment to the cause of unionization. “We built bridges to other departments, learning what was common to all as well as what was unique to each,” Coyle recounted. This phase of the campaign lasted for months without raising attention from the administration, and the meticulously kept records of conversations with workers provided insight to when the organizing committee reached a critical level of support. When the union went public in February, announcing to the administration their intent to file for NLRB recognition and beginning the process of collecting signatures, it took only two weeks to achieve 70% of workers signed onto pro-union cards. Just before Spring Break, organizers delivered their petition to Fordham and to the NLRB, beginning the legal process of recognition. Fordham declined to recognize the union voluntarily and disputed FGSW’s definition of the bargaining unit, but CWA was able to reach an agreement and set a date for the election within the academic year, less than a month after filing.

Organizers had just a few weeks to rally supporters to the election, which took place over two days on April 5 and 7. Holding the election in person presented an additional challenge in turning out voters who may not have otherwise traveled to campus, and those who could not be physically present were unable to vote. But victory was assured in any case. In the final days of the campaign, organizers made hundreds of phone calls to graduate workers who pledged to vote yes, and 229 of them cast their ballots. FGSW organizers successfully cornered administration

into holding a neutral stance regarding the union election, which in itself was a significant victory given the drawn out campaign for the FFU unionization effort in 2017. With little anti-union mobilization on the part of the administration, only 15 grad workers turned out to vote no. NLRB officials counted the ballots on site, immediately after voting closed as dozens of FGSW organizers waited outside to celebrate their resounding win.

After a campaign that met impressive success at every stage, FGSW is poised to bargain their first contract. The education division of CWA is stronger than ever, with thousands of graduate workers across the SUNY system now joined by over 300 new members at Fordham. Stony Brook’s RAU, however, is the only union for SUNY research assistants, while thousands more SUNY graduate workers are currently not represented by a union. The victory at Fordham, and dozens more graduate union wins around the country prove that we have the power, and now is the time, to fundamentally change the working conditions in higher education.



# HOUSING ISSUES AND STRUGGLES AT SBU AND IN SUFFOLK COUNTY

## The Stony Brook Worker Editorial

Housing is an issue that presents significant hardship for graduate students, and for the Suffolk County community as a whole. The Department of Housing and Urban Development characterizes as “rent burdened” anyone who spends more than 30% of their income on housing and as “severely rent burdened” those for whom housing expenses constitute more than 50% of their income.<sup>1</sup> It’s estimated that almost 40% of Suffolk County households were rent burdened in 2020.<sup>2</sup> In 2021, the average price for a house in Suffolk County was up to \$525,000, a 19% increase from the previous year.<sup>3</sup> In the Stony Brook area, house prices went up 41.7% last year to a median of \$730,000. In Suffolk County, due to zoning laws, the share of single-homes is at 81%, which is significantly high compared to other areas of the country, which makes it harder for graduate students to find affordable housing.<sup>4</sup>

At Stony Brook University, the prices for housing for graduate students have been increasing dramatically over the years. Chapin and Schomburg Apartments are two housing complexes that are available to graduate students. 2022-2023 rate for a one-bedroom family housing in Chapin Apartments is \$1,808 monthly. These prices are up from \$1515 for 2020-2021 and \$1,590 from 2021-2022. For Schomburg apartments, one bedroom family housing cost is \$2,174; up from \$1,893 and \$1,987 from the past two years respectively.

The rate for a single in a four bedroom apartment in Chapin apartments for 2022-2023 is \$1,024, which is up from \$863 and \$903 from the previous two years respectively. For Schomburg apartments, the prices for the last three years have increased from \$974 to \$1,022 and most recently to \$1,100. For a shared dou-

1 Larrimore, J., Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, Schuetz, J., & Institution, B. (n.d.). *Assessing the severity of rent burden on low-income families. The Fed - Assessing the Severity of Rent Burden on Low-Income Families*. Retrieved May 1, 2022, from <https://www.federalreserve.gov/econres/notes/feds-notes/assessing-the-severity-of-rent-burden-on-low-income-families-20171222.htm#:~:text=Consistent%20with%20the%20U.S.%20Department,as%20more%20than%2050%20percent.>

2 *Burdened households (5-year estimate) in Suffolk County, NY*. FRED. (2022, March 17). Retrieved May 1, 2022, from <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/DP04ACS036103>

3 Grossman, K., & Email Karl Grossman Email Created with Sketch. . (2021, September 11). *Suffolk closeup: Affordable Housing Crisis in the county. Shelter Island Reporter*. Retrieved May 1, 2022, from <https://shelterislandreporter.timesreview.com/2021/09/11/suffolk-closeup-affordable-housing-crisis-in-the-county/>

4 Appelbaum, B. (2022, February 24). *Long Island, we need to talk (about housing)*. The New York Times. Retrieved May 1, 2022, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/24/opinion/long-island-housing.html>

### AVOID SCAMS:

DO NOT give anyone rent money (or a deposit or fee) before touring the property, or having someone you trust tour it if you can't be there, AND getting the landlord's (or sublessor's) signature on a lease. You should also read the list of scam warning signs here:



LIFAIRHOUSING.ORG

Landlord & Tenant Rights - Long Island Housing Services, Inc.

Landlord / Tenant Rights & Responsibilities Whether you are a tenant or a landlord, we provide Landlord/Tenant Counseling to help you deal with issues related...Read more

Scam warning on an independently run Stony Brook Graduate Housing Facebook page.

ble room in a two bedroom apartment in the Chapin Apartments the price stands at \$742, up from \$647 and \$679 respectively the past two years. Schomburg apartments do not offer a shared bedroom option.

These prices not only illustrate incredible increases in housing prices over the years for graduate students, but also shows that it’s basically impossible for graduate students in PhD programs to live without being rent burdened with these housing options or to be able to support a family. The stipend for TAs and GAs currently stands at \$22,500. For any graduate worker supporting a family, staying in a family housing means spending \$21,696 yearly in Chapin apartments and \$22,716 in Schomburg apartments—almost all of the current base stipend. To have a single room in a four bedroom on-campus housing unit means spending \$12,288 in Chapin and \$13,200 in Schomburg apartments. So, TAs or GAs getting paid a base stipend

cannot afford to live in single rooms in four-bedroom apartments without being severely rent burdened. Even if one were staying in a shared double room in a two-bedroom apartment, one would have to spend 40% of one’s stipend towards rent, living in a rent burdened state.

In order to better understand the issues that graduate students are facing in campus housing, we spoke with a former member of the executive committee of Schomburg Apartments Residents Association (SARA), a grad student organization that used to exist to represent and advance the housing related interests of grad workers living in Schomburg Apartments. Our interviewee, who asked to remain anonymous, emphasized rent prices when asked about the most significant problems students are facing. As our interviewee noted, “If you consider like a 5% increase per year [to housing prices], our stipends, they don’t go up that much.” In this man-

ner, the non-correspondence between grad stipends and campus rent creates a situation wherein every year a larger portion of grad students' wages go towards rent. For those who live in campus housing, this effectively creates a situation where instead of raises, these grad students are getting a pay cut as they have to give back to the school more than they receive as raises.

Our interviewee also brought up concerns that grad students frequently face with regards to the treatment they received from the campus residences, specifically about practices and interactions that leave students feeling infantilized. Many grad students are adults in their late twenties or thirties, some starting families, yet they are not allowed to have simple household items like pressure cookers, air fryers, instant pots, string lights, toaster ovens, panini presses, and foreman grills in residences. There have been cases where items like this were confiscated.

The legal status of grad students in campus residences prevent them from having the same legal rights that protect tenants in normal lease agreements. The residents of on campus housing are considered licensees instead of tenants. In order to understand the consequences and intricacies of this distinction, we talked with Jonathan Sinnreich. Jonathan is a retired lawyer who is currently getting his PhD in the philosophy department.

Sinnreich noted that there is a significant legal difference between being a tenant of a real estate lease and being a licensee. He explained that in Anglo-American law, lease-holding rep-

resents a legal interest in the actual real property that the tenant is renting. This right is similar to the ownership right in that they are both interests linked to the property itself, although a leasehold right is a lesser interest than full title, and is limited by the terms of the lease. However, This leasehold interest in the property brings with it a number of procedural and substantive rights that are determined partly by the common law and partly by state statutory law. This includes certain protections for tenants, for example in the case of eviction these include time and procedures of notice. Sinnreich also added that there are even certain rights applicable to a residential lease that cannot be waived even by a contract agreed to by the tenant. This means the rights as they are in the law will be enforced over the lease.

The fundamental technical legal difference in the case of a licensee is that a license merely gives one the limited right of possession which means that within the time of the license you can be on the property and use it but you don't have any of the statutory or common law rights that go with a tenancy because a tenant has rights in the real property. This means that a license only gives rights to occupy and use the property within the terms of the license. The requirements of a license contract is not subject to the minimum legal requirements that a lease would be subject to either. As such, "right to possession is a much different and lesser right than a lease." A license is covered entirely by the terms of the license.

In the case of government prop-

erty, Sinnreich noted that there are restrictions on the use and alienation of government real property that makes it less common for the government to issue leases. So, in the case of public property, such as SBU housing, licenses are as such more common.

One important consequence of the distinction between licenses and leases is that a license is typically terminable at will whereas because a lease is a right in the real property, it is not. Sinnreich also added that in a case of disagreement of a tenant with a landlord, there are special landlord-tenant courts, or landlord-tenant parts of general lower courts, in which such courts are typically more sympathetic towards the tenants. However, this is not the case in license agreements, in which the terms of the license are typically more strictly enforced than in the case of a residential lease. This means, Sinnreich emphasizes, that if a licensee student gets into a disagreement with the university, based on a violation of the terms of occupancy, they would find little hope in a court procedure.

Sinnreich also elaborated on one another important consequence of a licensee agreement. According to the US constitution's 4th amendment, one is protected against unreasonable searches and seizures and a police warrant is required for such actions, including entering an apartment. However, the university is not subject to that to the extent that the university in the license reserves itself the right to enter student apartment to check for safety, contraband and stuff because you don't have

a protectable right in the property itself your rights under the 4th amendment to be from free from warrantless searches is different. So, the university can and it does give itself the right to enter, for specific purposes supposedly, but when somebody is in your apartment, they are in your apartment. All this is totally legal and constitutional. Sinnreich further highlighted that licensing is not the university acting in a weird or different way but what is typical for governmental occupancy agreements.

In parallel with Sinnreich's insights and explanations, one example that was independently highlighted by our anonymous interviewee was the administration's ability to reduce the capacity of campus housing quickly by removing licensees, something that would not be possible if the residents were classified as tenants. While we acknowledge that this measure was taken due to plausible health concerns, many grad students were kicked out of their apartments and left to find housing in the worst periods of the pandemic. The removal of graduate students was based on classification of essential and non-essential students, which our interviewee observed to be funded PhD students and non-funded Masters students, respectively. It is unclear how this classification was reached.

SARA and CARA currently are dissolved. Their dissolution and their past relationships with the administration highlight a control policy enacted through campus residences that attempts to undermine grad student's independent organization and advocacy. Executive committee mem-

bers of SARA and CARA used to get part of their rent waived due to their positions and contributions to the community. Any resident of Schomburg or Chapin Apartments was eligible by virtue of their residency to receive the benefits from SARA and CARA, like participation in events that they organized. Even though as residents these grad students are members of SARA and CARA, our interviewee noted that campus residences did not allow access to communication and member information from executive committees to residents.

When SARA executive committee asked to get access to listserv, they were told that any email that they wanted to send needed to be looked at first by campus residences and only allowed to be sent if they were found appropriate. However, what were some of the things that were thought to be inappropriate by campus residences? Our interviewee said that they were not allowed to send anything “that can potentially paint campus housing in a bad light,” including most simple questions like “What are your experiences of living in Schomburg?” or “What are your experiences with campus housing?” Such questions, in a conversation with the executive committee of SARA, were characterized as “leading questions” by campus residences. Our interviewee noted that one needs to know what residents think to be able to improve the conditions of housing. This censorship and control of communication by campus residences, though, illustrate a different priority: safeguarding the reputation of campus residences against hearing honest feedback from independently run

resident associations. Campus residences did not send out a feedback survey from their own office.

Our interviewee noted that this process of constructing a survey and eventually reaching a form that was approved by campus residences marked the downward turn between their relationship with campus residences. Next year when it was time to renew housing contracts, campus residences told the executive committee that they did not have the money to provide them with housing waivers. However, at the same time, campus residences increased rents. The SARA executive committee provided them with a budgetary analysis of how it would be possible to continue housing waivers.

Campus residences instead suggested that SARA and CARA executives join the undergraduate Residential Housing Association (RHA). Just like Resident Assistants (RA), this association’s members work officially under campus residences, unlike the previous positions of SARA and CARA executive boards. Our interviewee highlighted that RAs are usually under pressure to not enter into conflictual discourse with campus residences’ interests, which includes not being able to say certain words like “mold” in front of residences.

Executives of SARA and CARA believed that in order to advocate best for graduate students’ interests, they needed to be an independent body, and that working under campus residences would create conflict in instances where they would need to further grad students’ interests

against issues that result from mismanagement. They sought independent funding, but campus residences was adamant about their desired policy to include the boards of SARA and CARA under their employment. Unable to achieve independent status, eventually the organizations dissolved.

Other experiences that our interviewee highlighted showcase worrying instances of disregard for grad students’ concerns on the part of campus residences. When our interviewee brought concerns about the number of residents in some apartments presenting a health concern, they received the response that the worried residents can always search for off campus housing. Another involved a case in which a student was uncomfortable about getting back to campus residences over health concerns and asking for special accommodations. As noted by our interviewee the response from an official from campus residences was that the “person needs to prioritize between her health and her education.”

The problems that surround housing are not limited to the Stony Brook University community, but extend to our general area and beyond. In order to understand the housing issues in Suffolk County, learn about the struggles around us, and contribute to the development of a larger housing justice movement, we talked with Michael O. and Kyle P. from Suffolk County DSA, who serve as the co-chairs of the organization’s housing committee.

Michael O. noted that around 2018, as the organization was exploring issues that are prominent in the communi-

ty, it became clear that housing was one of them. They decided to form a tenant union working group to address these housing issues, and started focusing on the eviction crisis that hit the communities during the pandemic in Suffolk County. Throughout the crisis, Michael O. pointed out that the eviction moratorium that lasted until the end of 2021 was helpful in their organizing efforts, as it allowed them to build up their infrastructure. They organized a working group, and prepared know your rights pamphlets that focused on the moratorium and the Safe Harbor Act. Michael O. noted that there were already landlords that were trying to “take advantage of folks who may not have known that they weren’t allowed to be evicted during the pandemic.” During the moratorium, he continued, only evictions due to non-payment were barred, and evictions due to other reasons were still continuing.

The suburban setting of Suffolk County presents challenges for organizing around housing. Michael O. pointed out that compared to NYC, there are a lot more single-unit apartments, or tenants living in their landlords’ basements. This makes it harder to reach tenants for organizing purposes. Because of this and organizational capacity, they decided to begin working with apartment complexes that are struggling with the eviction crisis in Suffolk County, and go through the process of building up a tenants union.

Kyle P. then emphasized that as Suffolk is a high-cost area, there is a lot of housing insecurity, and people move around frequently. He added that during

their organizing they had many great interactions with the community, and saw that tenants in some cases are already organizing themselves. Even so, reaching impacted communities was difficult: “because folks are so materially insecure, there’s also a lot of mistrust about folks knocking on your door and things like that, willingness to talk. I wouldn’t say that’s the majority of folks. Trying to just spread the word and building trust is definitely an uphill battle.”

We asked Kyle P. to tell us a little more about what a tenants union is. He noted that it’s similar to a labor union but one that focuses on the tenant-landlord organization. He continued: “tenants organize themselves to use collective power to negotiate with and, and fight back against their landlord. You have a lot more freedom in terms of organization with a tenants union. There’s no set regulation about how to structure it gives a lot of freedom to tenants, to organize themselves in the way that they like.” Michael O. then emphasized that a tenants union starts with the tenants themselves, knocking on each others’ doors, “getting to know each other, sharing stories about their experiences living under the landlord. Social bonds are very, very important too, just getting to know each other, building friendships, building bonds, and building trust.”

After these bonds are developed and there is a significant number of tenants interested in building a union, tenants can put together their collective grievances and discuss options to challenge them with the landlord. There are different

escalation tactics, the first of which can be a common demand letter. Michael O. says that “when that almost certainly gets ignored, there are pressure campaigns, there are direct actions that are possible to pressure and shame the landlord into addressing the things that you’re looking for. But then, the ultimate escalation is the rent strike, which is when people stop sending their rent to their landlord.” He notes that rent strikes are not in people’s vocabulary too much in Suffolk County, but that there were many well-organized ones in the West coast, including one in Oakland that lasted 13 months and resulted in many victories.

Michael O. also encouraged any of our readers who are thinking about starting a tenant union or those in the process of doing so, whether students on campus or in the larger Suffolk County community, to reach out to them. He remarked that DSA plays a supporting role, and that the process is reliant on tenants themselves working to build their power. In this role, DSA can assist in canvassing, material support for food, and share experiences.

When we asked about some of the biggest challenges that they faced in tenant organizing, Michael O. brought attention to the process of “breaking that barrier from making that first contact and having those conversations to translating to participation.” He noted that even though in general people are open to the idea of a tenants union, getting practical participation might not be easy. For this, he thinks consistency might be the most effective factor. Showing up consistently

can build trust and illustrate that the organizers do not have a secret agenda and will not walk away.

Our final discussion was on the relationship between capitalism, class struggle and housing struggles and issues in general. We asked Kyle P. and Michael O. how they see the housing crises being resolved and how we can make sure everyone can get access to safe and affordable housing. Kyle P. answered:

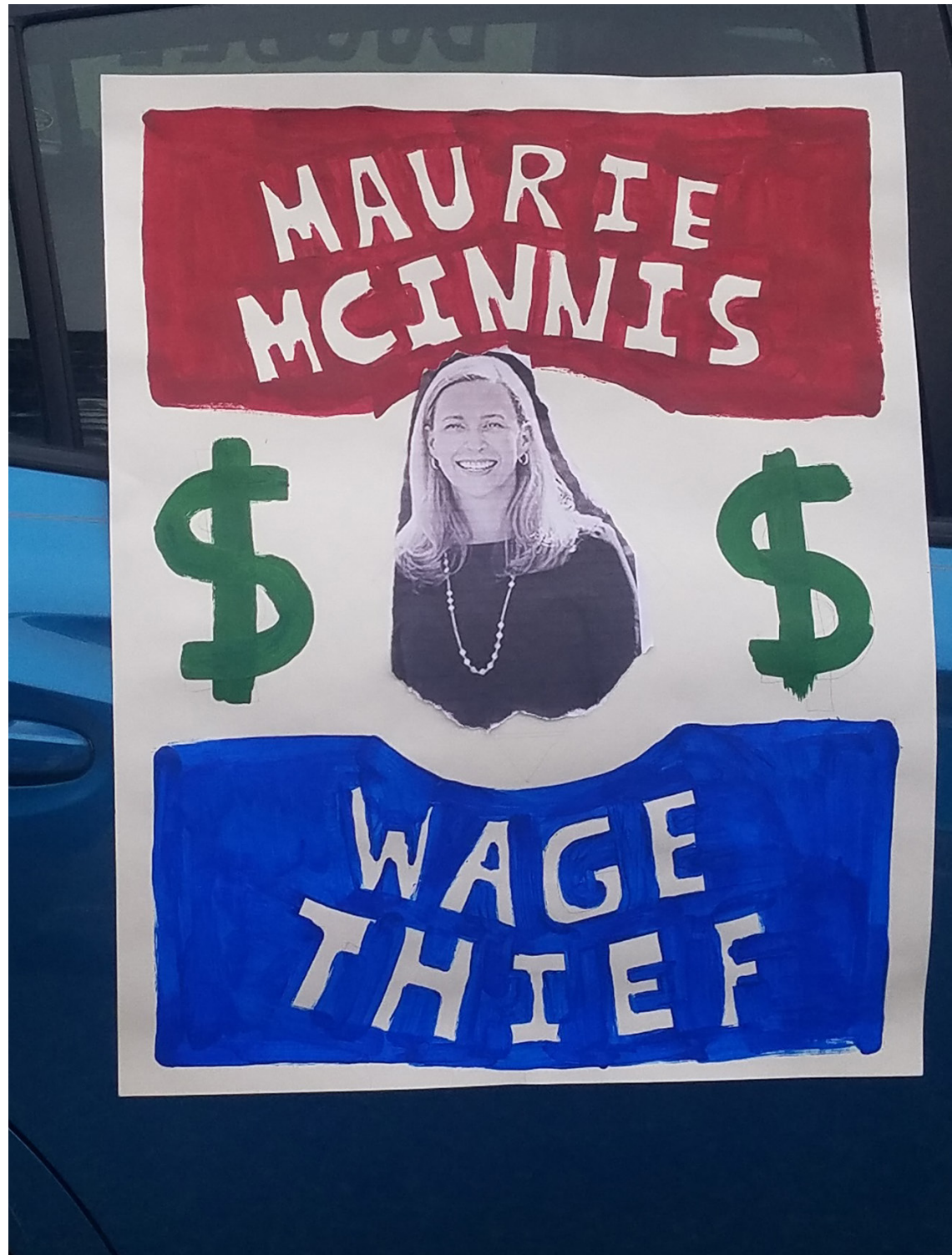
“Housing is one of the main areas where you can really see the contradictions of capitalism really, really sharpen pretty hard, the way housing is commodified. Where it’s going to go is, there’s going to be another real estate crash at some point. It’s kind of shocking that it hasn’t happened already, but with the rent consistently going up and wages stagnating, and with inflation and everything like that, eventually it will reach its breaking point.”

He continued to note that tenant organizing will prove very important in such a crisis, as it creates bonds of solidarity and mutual aid for people to stand up to landlords and support each other. Tenant organizing also builds up class resiliency in the sense that it brings workers from various different sectors together in a unifying issue.

Ultimately, though, the real solution lies in the elimination of private ownership of accommodation: “In my opinion what needs to happen is, housing just simply needs to be eliminated as a

commodity. We need to eliminate landlords as a thing and bring all housing more or less in common. And, at least in the short term, maybe link it with percentage of income, something like that. People are still paying rent, but it’ll be capped at like 10% of your income, whatever that may be. And of course, there’s not going to be a lot of money to be made there, but that shouldn’t be the point. The point should be to house people, because it’s a basic necessity of human life. How it will all pan out is hard to predict, but certainly the more organized folks are more resilient and better prepared when the next crisis does come around.”

We could only cover some of the many housing problems and struggles in our campus and community. There are similar issues, for example, faced by undergraduates at Stony Brook that we’d hope to give voice to in this publication’s later issues. However, it’s clear that graduate students are in desperate need of affordable housing, and that an autonomous organization of graduate students on issues of housing has the potential to improve the housing conditions on our campus.

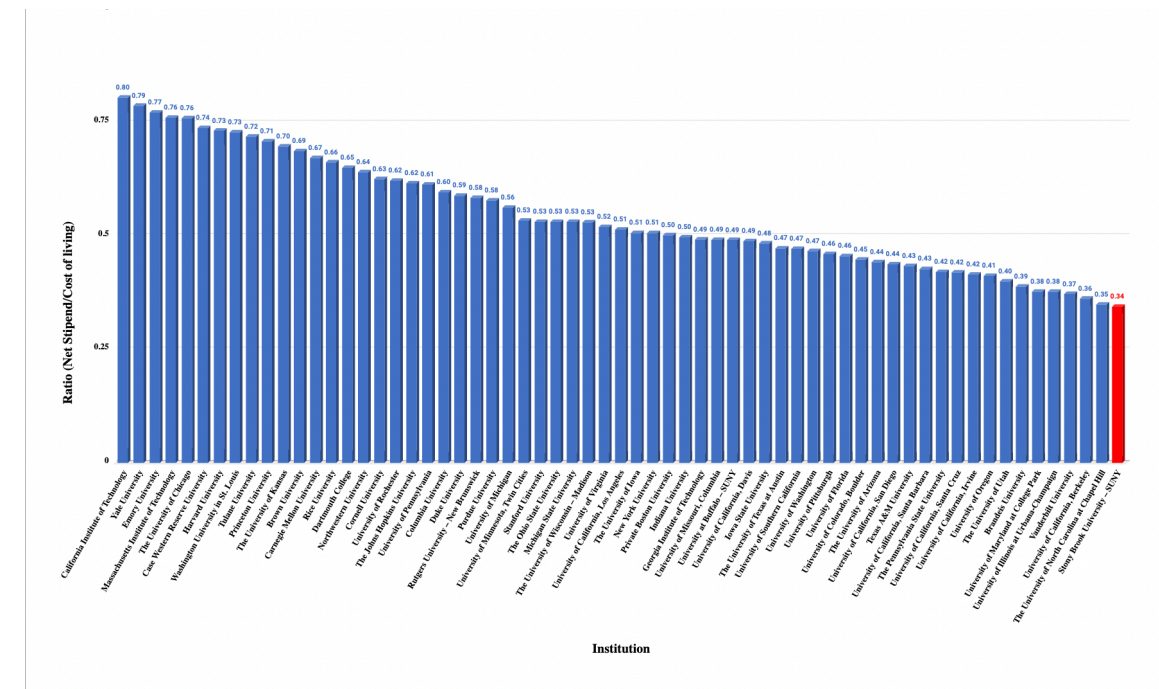


## HOW GRADUATE STUDENT WORKERS AT STONY BROOK WON THE ABOLITION OF BROAD-BASED FEES

### The Stony Brook Worker Editorial

In the fall of 2020, graduate student workers here at Stony Brook University – one of the largest and most prestigious public universities in the country, and the flagship university of the SUNY system – won an important victory against the university’s administration and its fees policy. Even though graduate workers at Stony Brook provide more than half of the

labor required for teaching and grading, the university has for years charged graduate student employees an array of what they call ‘broad-based fees’ every semester. These fees are vaguely defined and non-transparent. As part of this fee package, for instance, grad student employees were forced to pay line items such as an ‘Academic Excellence Fee’ or a ‘College



The Net Stipend to Cost of Living Ratio for the Association of American Universities (AAU) as of October 21, 2020. Since the fee scholarship, Stony Brook’s graduate worker stipend has moved up in rank to be sixth to last. Left: Car poster from the Abolish Fees Car Rally on September 9, 2020



Fee, which, put together, amounted to over a thousand dollars each semester, without any tangible information as to what these fees pay for and why they are levied in the first place. The total tally of these broad-based fees stood at around \$700 per semester in 2013, but in recent years – due to alleged budget deficits, and in keeping with the general neoliberal trend of further commodifying higher education – the university had consistently increased these fees every semester, to the point where they had spiraled out of control and had become untenable for generally underpaid and overworked graduate student employees.

In the fall semester of 2020, when the economic effects of the global COVID pandemic were felt by so many working people, the fees for grad students averaged roughly \$1,200 per semester, or \$2,400 for the academic year, depending on a grad student's individual situation. For most grad student employees, this represents about one tenth of their annual income, or the equivalent to nearly three full paychecks, which they essentially had to pay back to the university, in some cases before they were even able to assume their duties. If this sounds like a form of wage theft or a pay-to-work scheme, that's largely because it is. It seems that, in attempts to recoup some of the alleged budget shortfalls, Stony Brook University had increasingly relied on raising broad-based fees to gen-

Members of the Graduate Student Employees Union (GSEU) on May 1, 2019, protesting the increase in their fees. Credit: Emma Harris/The Statesman

erate additional revenue on the backs of its graduate student workforce.

In a recent turn of events, however, Stony Brook University President Maurie McInnis's Office announced on October 28, 2020, that, "[b]eginning in the Spring 2021 semester, the university will provide scholarships to cover the broad-based fees of all students on graduate tuition scholarships in terminal degree programs." For the vast majority of Stony Brook's graduate student employees, this would mean that the broad-based fees will finally be a thing of the past. But make no mistake about this. What sounds like a gracious move on the part of the university's administration is actually the culmination of years of hard work and organizing by both leadership and rank-and-file members of the Graduate Student Employees Union (GSEU), a unique sub-division of the Communications Workers of America, Local 1104, which represents all Graduate Assistants and Teaching Assistants at Stony Brook.

This victory, while not necessarily anticipated, is hardly surprising given the Graduate Student Employees Union's vehement and vigorous opposition and mobilization against Stony Brook's unjust fees in recent years. In fact, the GSEU has quite a history of organizing and pushing back against injustices, including various attempted cutbacks and cost increases at Stony Brook. In 2017, for instance, students, faculty, and union members came together for a 'March for Humanities,' which the GSEU had organized to protest the administration's plans to cut funding for liberal arts programs and even entire

departments. As a result of this protest and the organized pushback across campus, the Hispanic Languages and Literature department, a particular target in those proposed cutbacks, was subsequently saved.

Since then, GSEU leadership and rank-and-file membership have become even more active and committed to the material welfare of graduate student workers. In the Spring of 2019, GSEU had organized a huge campus-wide protest against yet another fee hike, and against the university's fees policy overall. Then, in the summer of 2019, GSEU members organized a trip to Albany where they lobbied New York state legislators to pass a bill that would eradicate broad-based fees for graduate student workers entirely. The bill passed the NY State Senate unanimously, and it was on track to be included as a rider amendment in the New York state budget for the past three years, but unfortunately it was defeated every time, either because of budgetary constraints or because of the effects of the COVID pandemic.

Yet, despite these setbacks, GSEU went back to the drawing board. In the Fall semester of 2020, when the university remained steadfast on proceeding with another round of fee increases despite the pandemic, GSEU members organized follow-up actions including a car protest to continue to pressure the administration to renege on its planned fee hikes for that year. But just as in previous years, Stony Brook decision-makers merely granted an extension to the due date for grad students

to pay their fees without penalty, which is a rather meaningless gesture considering that many grad workers cannot afford these fees to begin with. This issue is further compounded by the fact that grad student worker stipends at Stony Brook are among the lowest of all 65 member universities in the Association of American Universities (AAU), and it is further exacerbated by the fact that the cost of living on Long Island is disproportionately higher than in most other parts of the country.

With many grad student employees squeezed into economic situations that are beyond sustainable, rank-and-file GSEU members resorted to direct action in the form of a fee strike. An internal poll circulated among union members showed widespread support for withholding payment of the broad-based fees to force the administration's hands. Well over 500 grad students signed the pledge to not pay their fees, and even several faculty and undergraduate students supported the fee strike in solidarity. Hundreds of grad student employees withheld their fees and launched grass-roots social media campaigns in which they shared testimonies of grad student workers and their economic plight due to low stipends, the high cost of living in the region, and the high and increasing fees every semester. Grad student workers opened up about how they would skip meals, take on extra work in addition to their own research and on-campus responsibilities, with some even considering leaving their graduate studies altogether because they could no longer afford it. For many, the fee strike was the only logical



Excerpt of a graduate student fees testimonial made into an Instagram post.

conclusion. Years of protest and organizing finally brought Stony Brook's grad students to the realization that only through their own direct and collective action could they produce tangible results. Whatever spin the university's administration may put on this development, President McInnis' announcement that Stony Brook University would cover the broad-based fees for the vast majority of graduate students beginning in the Spring of 2021, was a direct result of the commitment and the strength in numbers among the university's graduate student workers and the GSEU as the labor union that represents them. In fact, the latest fee increase was instituted after McInnis started her term. It is evidence that constant dripping wears the stone.

The outcome at Stony Brook, i.e. the quasi-abolition of the broad-based fees for graduate students, was a huge victory for grad student workers. It should be a

valuable lesson and a blueprint to signal to workers in higher education at Stony Brook and across the country that persistent protests, legislative lobbying, and direct action can and do make an impact. SBU GSEU's victory was inspirational, not only for other SUNY campuses where other GSEU chapters began their struggles against fees, but also for unions at other universities across the nation with whom our organizers have been in contact. The victory of the Graduate Student Employees Union in forcing Stony Brook University's administration to essentially abolish the fees for grad students, and for grad student workers in particular, exemplifies that even in the post-Janus era and during a global pandemic, a robust union with an energized membership can achieve tremendous results for working people.



May Day March Rally for fees on May 1, 2019.

## WHY THE UNITED STATES DOESN'T OBSERVE MAY 1 AS LABOR DAY

### Stony Brook Worker Editorial

In countries around the world, May 1 is commonly recognized as International Workers' Day. But when it comes to honoring the accomplishments of organized labor, the United States occupies quite a different ideological and symbolic terrain compared to most western industrialized democracies. The American version of a national holiday dedicated to workers is Labor Day, which is celebrated on the first Monday in September. And while Labor Day may officially pay lip service to recognizing the contributions of the American labor movement, it was also deliberately chosen to detract from the global struggles of labor against exploitative capital interests. The story as to why the US does not observe Labor Day on May 1 begins in the late 19th century and is marked by struggle and violence.

The late 19th century, which is often referred to as the Gilded Age, was characterized by rapid economic and technological development, as well as the inception of modern corporate capitalism. But this was also an era defined by exploitative wage labor, widespread poverty, and industrial tyranny over working people's lives. Large industrialists commonly exploited their workers by paying them extremely low wages, making them work long hours, and routinely putting their corporate profits over the health and well-being of working people. At a time when industrial accidents and death were frequent, and income, wealth, and power had become distributed highly unequally in the hands of a very few corporate entities, American workers sought to organize and push back against the exploitative practices of their employers, for

instance, by forming the first big labor unions, such as the Knights of Labor in 1869. Unlike the more conservative and exclusionary American Federation of Labor (AFL), the other big labor union at that time, the Knights of Labor built a large and relatively diverse coalition, with hundreds of thousands of members nationwide by the early 1880s. The Knights even ran candidates in local and state elections, and their main goal was to challenge the influence of big business and the hegemony of laissez-faire doctrines. Instead of cementing the status quo, labor unions like the Knights called and organized for industrial democracy, humane working conditions, fair pay, and a general redistribution of wealth and political power.

By the 1880s, unions had grown in strength, but big industrialists frequently conspired with state and federal governments to put down labor activism at every turn. In the process, acts of violence against workers became more common, and industrialists often hired company guards or enlisted private detectives known as Pinkertons to suppress workers and to prevent them from organizing and unionizing, which resulted in even more frequent violent clashes between capital and labor. These developments, in addition to the desolate working and living conditions at this time, led many working people to believe that unrestrained industrial capitalism and political democracy were not compatible. American workers became increasingly class conscious, and even experimented with socialist or anarchist ideas.

By the mid-1880s, when American labor





Popular wood engraving of the Haymarket Riot in 1886. Credit: Getty Images.

movements began to honor and observe May 1 as International Labor Day, even more violence ensued. The first big May Day celebrations in the US were held by labor unions on and around May 1, 1886. In demonstrations and protests around the country, workers reinforced their calls for industrial democracy and fair labor practices, and especially the adoption of the 8-hour workday. In cities across the country, working people came out to jubilant celebrations, much to the chagrin

of industrialists and their allies in government. In Chicago, the situation took a dramatic turn. During May Day demonstrations on May 3, a kerfuffle erupted between workers and police, and in the process, the police shot and killed four workers. The next day, workers held a rally in Chicago's Haymarket Square to protest and condemn these killings. During this rally, a bomb exploded, which killed one policeman. Almost immediately, the police opened fire, killing several

people and wounding several more, including a few police officers. And while the origin of the bomb and the identity of the person or persons responsible remained undetermined, law enforcement violently put down any type of organized labor activity and raided the offices of labor groups.

The corporate-controlled press quickly blamed workers, labor unions, and anarchists for the violence, and worked to and publicly delegitimize organized labor. These tactics proved

to be successful, because in the aftermath of the Haymarket riot, the labor movement took heavy blows. In August that year, eight alleged anarchists, who had been arrested in the Haymarket affair, were tried and convicted by a biased jury without tangible evidence. Most of them were sentenced to death, and four of them were executed in November that year. In the years following the Haymarket affair, big business, government, and the press continued their concerted attacks and propaganda campaigns against organized labor, and by the end of the decade, the Knights of Labor were left severely weakened and in disarray. Yet, their legacy would inspire other labor organizations, such as the American Railway Union or the Socialist Party, in the years to come.

But by the early 1890s, capital had seemingly won primacy over labor, and corporate capitalists cemented their stranglehold over working people's lives in a number of ways. Big industrialists often used mechanization and technological advancement to reorganize their business operations to de-skill their workers and compartmentalize production processes in order to wrest away from workers what little power and autonomy they had left. Some industrialists built entire company towns, where their employees would live, work, and spend their spare time. In these company towns, the company owners controlled all institutions of public life, including housing, supply chains, and facilities. The inception of these company towns placed even greater control over working people's lives into the hands of big industrial capitalists, and workers felt the effects of this, especially during economic downturns. To protect their profits and power, industrialists used recessions to cut workers' pay, raise their rents, raise prices in company stores, and thus further exploit their already vulnerable workforces. Still, workers sought to organize and fight back where they could.

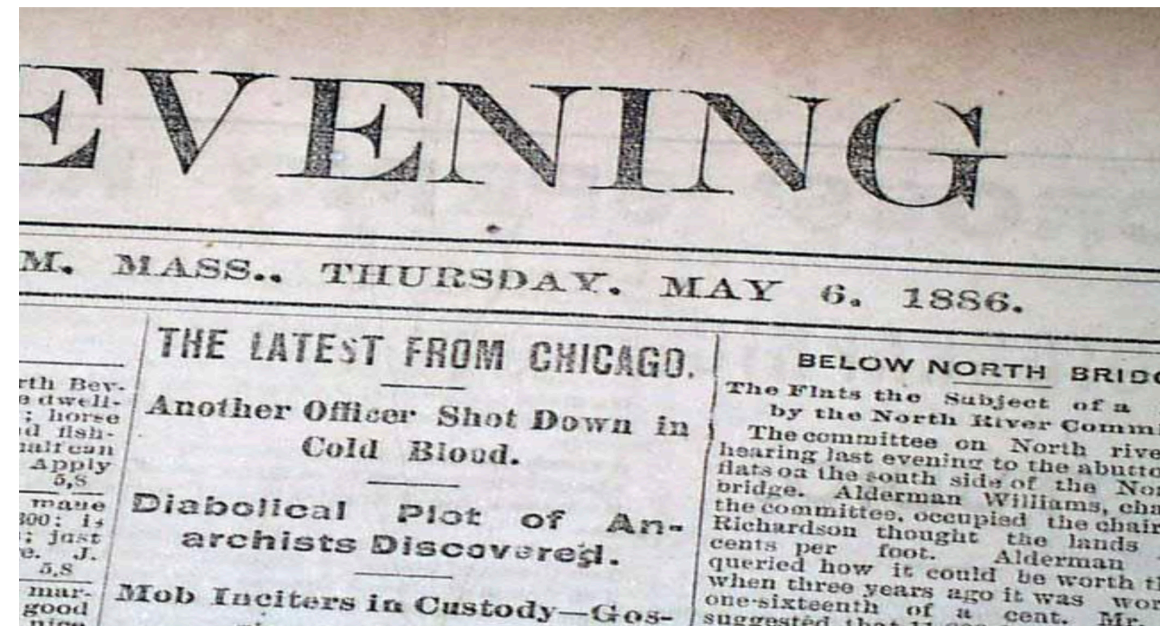
One such example came in the shape of the Pullman strike in the summer of 1894. During the most recent recession, George M. Pullman, owner of the Pullman Palace Car Company and the company town of Pullman, Illinois, had cut wages, raised prices, and fired unionized workers. In protest over these actions, workers at the Pullman company town went on strike. Aided by leading members of the growing American Railway Union (ARU), which included future presidential candidate and Socialist Party icon Eugene V. Debs, the striking Pullman workers also staged a nationwide boycott of Pullman train cars. Incensed by their actions, Pullman hired armed guards to break the strikes, and he relied on the press to agitate against the striking workers and the ARU. Moreover, Pullman also enlisted the federal government for assistance when he got President Grover Cleveland to sanction the use of mail cars belonging to the United States Postal Service as props. That way, when workers tried to shut down operations, they could be arrested and charged with obstruction of the mail, a federal offense. As a result, state and federal courts issued injunctions and jailed union leaders, including Debs. Additionally, Pullman also convinced federal, state, and local authorities to employ police and military troops to break up strikes and shoot striking workers.

Such instances of brazen violence and exploitation of workers were hardly isolated incidents. In 1892, two years before the Pullman affair, a similar episode took place at Andrew Carnegie's steel works in Homestead, Pennsylvania. Here, Carnegie and his right-hand man Henry C. Frick fired thousands of unionized workers, locked them out of the factory, and replaced them with non-unionized workers. The workers organized to fight back by blockading the steel works and trying to shut down operations, but Frick quickly called in armed mercenaries and even the Pennsylvania state militia, which

then brutalized and killed several workers. As such, the Homestead Strike and the Pullman Strike constitute two high-profile examples of the violent suppression of organized labor at the hands of industrial capitalists in conjunction with local, state, and federal governments and their law enforcement apparatuses, that was so common in the United States during the late 19th century.

At the heart of the conflict between capital and labor lay two competing visions of what constituted liberty. For working people, liberty meant economic security and autonomy from the tyranny of their employers. For capitalists, liberty meant unrestricted property rights, with no restraints from unions or governments. Wealthy industrialists and members of the upper classes in society were particularly fearful of organized labor as potential harbingers of anarchism or socialism. Thus, they argued that the government must use its power to keep labor in check, and to help capital interests quell any sort of rebellious sentiments. And by and large, governments tended to side with capital interests. In frequent confrontations between labor and capital during the late 19th century and even into the early 20th century, governments often firmly and violently supported capital. Ironically, the armies and militias that were used to quell the secessionist rebellion in the Confederate states and to ensure the victory of free labor over forced labor during the Civil War, were used by the 1870s and 1880s to put down strikes and labor uprisings in industrial center in the North. Put another way, one can argue that by the late 19th century, the federal government in particular no longer protected oppressed and marginalized people, but instead firmly supported and protected the interests of big business and wealthy industrialists.

In this generally hostile climate, organized labor enjoyed only few victories, and often had to accept consolation prizes in the shape of symbolic gestures. Ironically, one such symbolic



Salem Evening News, Salem, MA, May 6, 1886.

gesture was the conceptualization of a public holiday dedicated to the labor movement. While Labor Day celebrations in the United States can be traced back to as early as 1882 in some states, it was not until 1894, when Congress passed, and President Grover Cleveland signed into law, a bill to make Labor Day a federal holiday. Of course, this Labor Day holiday was nothing but a conciliatory gesture to appease workers. Moreover, given the frequent violent clashes between labor and capital, and especially high-profile incidents like the Haymarket Affair or the Pullman Strike, both of which occurred at the beginning of May

and thus coincided with International Workers Day, American lawmakers went out of their way to distinguish the American Labor Day holiday from International Workers Day. As such, they deliberately designated the first Monday in September as Labor Day, so as not to acknowledge or give credibility to the more radical history and significance of International Workers' Day. And while working people, both then and now, surely appreciate a much-deserved day off work, let our appetite for full-fledged worker democracy not be dulled by the table scraps that the capitalist class throws down to us.

# ART REVIEW: PRINTING SOLIDARITY AT ZUCCAIRE GALLERY

by Kaya Turan



Posters included in *Printing Solidarity*. From left to right: Alfrédo Rostgaard, *Day of Solidarity with the Congo* (1972), Olivio Martínez, *Day of Solidarity with Guatemala* (1968), and Alfrédo Rostgaard, *Che* (1969).

From December 1, 2021, to March 12, 2022, Paul W. Zuccaire Gallery, located in Stony Brook's Staller Center for the Arts, exhibited *Printing Solidarity: Tricontinental Graphics from Cuba*. The exhibition, showcasing brightly colored political posters produced in 1960s and 70's Cuba, was curated by four graduate workers in the Department of Art History and Criticism: Elise Armani, Amy Kahng, Daniel Menzo, and Sarah Myers, under the guidance of Assistant Professor Sohl Lee. Giovanni Bello and Matías Hermosilla, graduate workers in the Department of History, contributed a music playlist to

accompany the exhibition (listen here: [https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PL90dQGkcOFs1\\_Ph43e8zYRgExlunTWE-4](https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PL90dQGkcOFs1_Ph43e8zYRgExlunTWE-4)). *Printing Solidarity*, though not entirely uncritical, celebrates an alternative revolutionary and anti-imperialist aesthetics, founded in humor and an engagement with popular culture.

The posters in the show come from artists in the Organization of Solidarity with the Peoples of Africa, Asia, and Latin America (OSPAAAL), a Cuban movement founded in 1966 aimed at fostering unity amongst Third World or Non-Aligned nations. In the wake of post-WWII

decolonization and Cold War neo-imperialism, OSPAAAL sought to create new modes of global and anti-imperialist solidarity. As part of these efforts, the organization published its journal *Tricontinental*, which included posters by renowned Cuban artists as free magazine inserts. Making up the content of *Printing Solidarity*, these posters navigate between aesthetics and communication, and are not conventional art objects. Many of the posters have visible fold marks, underscoring their status as not only art but also as objects of material culture, distributed and disseminated for political mobilization.

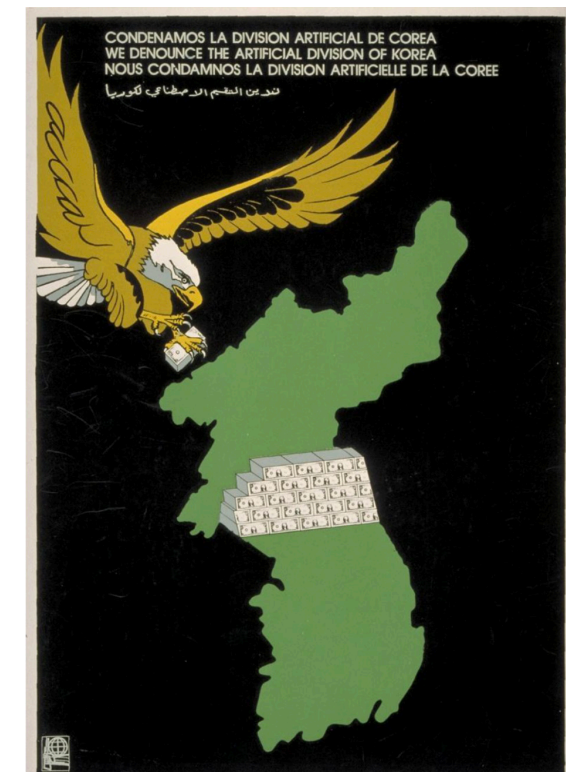
The show is divided into five categories, identified by the curators as central themes of OSPAAAL posters: "Cult of Personality," "Weaponry and Warfare," "Precolonial Iconography," "Women and Children," and "Typography and Design." An exhibition booklet was produced for the show, with interpretive wall labels for posters written by undergraduate students in Professor Sohl Lee's 'ARH 391: Topics in Global Art' course.

The "Cult of Personality" section demonstrates OSPAAAL's departure from historical revolutionary aesthetic conventions: romanticized and stoic images of revolutionary leaders are replaced with brightly colored and playful portraits, as seen in Alfrédo Rostgaard's psychedelic rendering of Che Guevara (see above). OSPAAAL's use of play and humor is seen in Rostgaard's depiction of Richard Nixon as a vampire. The section on "Typography and Design" underscores OSPAAAL's engagement with popular culture: the vibrant and energetic posters were designed to grab the viewer's attention and pull them in, and movie and rock-band posters were a significant influence on OSPAAAL's lively designs.

*Printing Solidarity's* framing of and engagement with the posters is not wholly laudatory, however. In the section on "Women

and Children," the curators emphasize that while women frequently served as subject matter for posters, only eight of fifty OSPAAAL artists were female. Furthermore, depictions of women were often overshadowed by hyper-masculine images of revolutionary leaders. In "Precolonial Iconography," Cuban artists grapple with the difficulty of constructing solidarity with communities across the world, at times resorting to essentialized imagery of Africa and Asia.

A series of talks and lectures were launched to accompany *Printing Solidarity*. Among these was a guest lecture by graphic designer Scott Starrett, co-founder and designer director of political graphic design company Tandem. Starrett has worked with Black Lives Matter, Sunrise



Alberto Blanco, *We Denounce the Artificial Division of Korea* (1980).

Movement, Planned Parenthood, and, most famously, with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez on her 2018 congressional campaign. At Zuccaire Gallery, Starett spoke about political aesthetics and design, stressing that design always entails an engagement with historical materials. He outlined the process for several Tandem design campaigns



Installation view of Alfrédo Rostgaard's *Folding Nixon Poster*.

and considered the ways in which these works drew on and referenced histories of revolutionary and poster aesthetics.

You can find a video of Starett's talk and a panel discussion with the curators, as well as a guided video tour of the exhibition with Amy Kahng and Daniel Menzo, at the following link: [https://zuccairegallery.stonybrook.edu/exhibitions/\\_past/printing\\_solidarity\\_2021.php](https://zuccairegallery.stonybrook.edu/exhibitions/_past/printing_solidarity_2021.php)

We congratulate our fellow graduate workers on an important and highly successful exhibition. Though *Printing Solidarity* is no longer showing at Zuccaire Gallery, opportunities remain to see revolutionary design in New York, as well as more work curated by Stony Brook graduate



Installation view of *Printing Solidarity* at Paul W. Zuccaire Gallery.

workers. At the Poster House in Chelsea, an exhibition on *The Utopian Avant-Garde: Soviet Film Posters of the 1920s* is showing through August 21, 2022 (<https://posterhouse.org/exhibition/the-utopian-avant-garde-soviet-film-posters-of-the-1920s>).

In Harlem, Stony Brook Art History PhD student Amy Kahng has curated the inaugural exhibition for AHL Foundation's new West Harlem gallery. The show will be open through May 21, 2022, and showcases artists and art practices that reflect on the spaces of Harlem and

Upper Manhattan (<https://www.ahlfoundation.org/ahf-foundation-announces-opening-of-new-gallery-in-west-harlem-in-april-2022-inaugural-exhibition-featuring-buhm-hong-gyun-hur-devin-osorio-and-dianne-smith/>).

# NOT JUST PARIS IN '68: THE GLOBAL SIXTIES IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH CONFERENCE

by John Bradley

In early April, Stony Brook hosted “The Global Sixties in the Global South,” a two-day international conference that sought to “interrogate the globality of the global sixties across Africa, Asia, and Latin America.” Decentering North America and Europe in its approach to the global sixties, the conference instead explored the dynamic and interconnected social upheavals of the Global South as “colonial empires were crumbling.” Scholars from diverse fields across the humanities presented their work on the dramatic shifts and surprising connections that typify this period.

Several themes seemed to resonate across many of the conference’s presentations. Of note was the centrality of violence as a key contextual factor to global sixties trends. The Cuban Revolution, the Vietnam War, and United States military presence throughout the Global South in this period set the stage for transnational contact and exchange. Travel, also, played a key role in the interconnectedness of the Global South during this period. Migrants, soldiers, and artists all formed connections across borders and oceans that contributed to the cultural dynamism and global resonance of this period. Personal intimacy seemed to come to the fore as a possible framework for understanding how people related to these global trends, with the body being all at once a context for contact, a topic of public concern, and a focus of individual struggle.

While the decentering of the United States and Western Europe was a deliberate organizational

principle of the conference, the scholarship presented also decentered the Soviet Union. This may be explained by the limited role of the USSR in the Global South after 1962, but it also indicates how robust the conference’s conceptualization of an interconnected Global South is. The research presented in this conference displayed a world of South-South connections with no need for a North intermediary, whether from the Western Bloc or the Eastern. The focus of the conference was not just South-South, but also typically left-left, falling in line with the traditional conception of the global sixties as a left-wing project. The investigation of right-right connections in the Global South during this period may be a fruitful direction for future research.

Overall, this conference represents an innovative trend in scholarship toward uncovering an understudied dimension of modern history. The concluding roundtable discussion suggested a need to develop new vocabulary to describe its phenomena, as well as the importance of establishing common points of reference. The conference reminds us all of the importance of thinking globally, both in our scholarship and in our activism. Even when traditional thought on the global sixties has emphasized the social upheavals of the US and Western Europe, entirely new narratives emerge when we choose instead to focus on the interconnected Global South.

