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Undergraduate Bargaining Units Are Here to Stay—and 20,000 Members Stronger

Labor Relations Update on **March 1, 2024**

A growing trend of union organizing among undergraduate student workers reached a crescendo last week when a unit of 20,000 student assistants at California State University voted in favor of unionization.

California State University Employees Union Election

Student assistants across California State University's 23 campuses have unequivocally voted to form the largest undergraduate student union in history. In April 2023, California State University Employees Union, SEIU Local 2579 filed a petition with the California Public Employment Relations Board ("CPERB") seeking to represent a unit of almost 20,000 student assistants—undergraduate and graduate students working on campus in non-academic positions such as clerical workers in information technology, financial aid, and facilities management. Among other concerns that commonly drive organizing efforts on college campuses, student assistants at the university are unionizing for pay increases, more work hours, and sick leave.

In December 2023, the university and the union entered into a consent election agreement through CPERB, pursuant to which a representation election was conducted electronically by the American Arbitration Association from January 25, 2024 through February 22, 2024. The undergraduate student assistants voted 7,050 – 202 in favor of unionization, forming the largest undergraduate student union to date. The university and the union will soon begin negotiations for a collective bargaining agreement.

Overview of Undergraduate Unionization

While union organizing on college campuses is certainly not a new phenomenon, union activity in higher education, particularly among student workers, experienced dramatic growth in 2022 and 2023. According to a report published by the National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions, unions secured 30 new bargaining units representing student workers in 2022 and 2023. (*Union Organizing and Strikes in Higher Education: The 2022-2023 Upsurge in Historical Context*, National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions.) This represents a nearly 50% increase from the 21 bargaining units organized over the 8-year period between 2013 and 2021. Whereas, in the past, unions seeking to represent student workers in higher education generally received the support of about 75% of eligible student workers, on average more than 90% of eligible student workers voted in favor of unionization in representation elections in 2022 and 2023.

While a significant portion (93%) of the student workers organized during this period were graduate students, organizing among undergraduate student workers also saw a considerable surge in the last few years. Uncertainties in student employment caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have led undergraduate student workers to organize. Similar to graduate students, undergraduate concerns include compensation, job security, rent assistance, and protections against harassment and discrimination.

Before 2022, undergraduate unions were relatively uncommon, with one longstanding bargaining unit of resident advisors and tutors at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. Then, in 2016, student dining hall workers at Grinnell College formed the first independent union for undergraduate students at a private college in the United States. While undergraduate student workers continued to organize post Grinnell, successful undergrad organizing campaigns were few and far between prior to 2022. Between 2022 and 2023, 11 new undergraduate student worker bargaining units were successfully organized, with an additional 8 undergraduate representation cases pending before the NLRB or state labor relations agency at the end of 2023. (*January 2024 Newsletter*, National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions.)

While not an exhaustive summary, below is an overview of recent organizing activity among undergraduate student workers across the country:

- *Grinnell College:* Following the successful unionization of student dining hallworkers in 2016, the Union of Grinnell Student Dining Workers (UGSDW) has since expanded its jurisdiction to a campus-wide unit of all hourly student workers, making Grinnell College the first fully unionized undergraduate school in the United States.
- *Hamilton College:* In 2021, student workers serving as tour guides and admission fellows in the admissions office voted in an NLRB election to join United Food and Commercial Workers International Union Local 1. The union's election represents the first of its kind representing college admissions office workers.
- *Dartmouth College:* Undergraduate student workers at Dartmouth's campus dining halls unanimously voted in an NLRB election in March 2022 in favor of unionizing with the Student Worker Collective at Dartmouth. In January 2024, Dartmouth undergraduate advisors issued an open letter to administration announcing their intention to organize under the Student Worker Collective at Dartmouth, identifying increased compensation and improved training as one of several demands to the university.
- *Harvard University:* Undergraduate academic workers have been represented by the Harvard Graduate Students Union-UAW since 2018. In October 2023, Harvard's undergraduate non-academic workers—specifically those students working in university libraries, cafes, the Cambridge Queen's Head Pub, and the equity, diversity, and inclusion offices—voted in favor of unionizing with the Harvard Undergraduate Workers Union – UAW, with 99.4% of eligible student workers voting in favor of unionization.
- *Kenyon College:* In 2020, undergraduate student workers employed at Kenyon College began organizing a union—the Kenyon Student Worker Organizing Committee. The union, which represents approximately 60% of Kenyon student workers such as student teachers, resident hall assistants, library workers, and farm and greenhouse workers, has filed a petition for recognition with the NLRB and gone on strike four times since 2020. The college has consistently refused to recognize the union. After a prolonged postponement, representation proceedings before the NLRB have recommenced, with a pre-election hearing scheduled for October 2023.
- *Resident Advisors Bargaining Units:* Between 2022 and 2023, undergraduate student workers serving as resident advisors have voted in favor of unionization at a number of colleges and universities, including Swarthmore College, Smith College, Reed College, Barnard College, Tufts University, University of Pennsylvania, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Fordham University, and Wesleyan University. In March 2022, Wesleyan University voluntarily recognized the Wesleyan Union of Student Employees representing about 100 undergraduate residential life student employees—the first union of its kind to be voluntarily recognized by a

university.

Takeaway

The successful union election at California State University may further encourage the growing organizing efforts among undergraduate student workers, joining the tens of thousands of graduate and, now, postdoc students who have organized over the past several years. This is a trend we expect to continue, and we will keep you informed of the latest in higher education unionization here.

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