Organizing in East Texas: Graduate Student Unionizing in an Anti-Union State

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Abstract

"Organizing in East Texas" is a firsthand account of the practices and action steps taken to soften the climate of a region hostile to union activity. We tell the story of how that shift in attitudes took place among a group of graduate students. From a grassroots letter-writing campaign that anonymized but personalized the economic reality of our shared situation, to surreptitious propaganda disbursal of student-made 'zines around campus locations to raise general awareness, concrete steps that translate regardless of population are recommended and discussed. Told from the perspective of a blue-state native's attempts to unionize amidst a climate antagonistic to the practice and a red-state native's jump headlong into labor organization and activism, "Organizing in East Texas" discusses practices and immediately actionable steps anyone can take to form solidarity and affect change in the work climate for graduate students or other precarious labor.

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Graduate student workers are often dismissed in their institutions. Underpaid, overworked, exhausted and frustrated, they often feel unheard and taken advantage of. They exist in a weird limbo—not quite students, not quite faculty or staff—and can often feel powerless when it comes to speaking up or advocating for themselves. But there is a solution: unions. Although they are often frowned upon and discouraged by administrations, union membership and collective advocacy can promote real change and improve conditions for graduate student workers. Grassroots, direct action remains one of the best and most effective ways to improve working conditions on the ground.

In this article, we share our experiences with unions, both as individuals and as a collective. The first story, Brian's experience, shares the perspective of someone who grew up in a pro-union environment, and seeing the dire need for a collective effort among graduate students in a rural East Texas university. The second, Rachel's, is that of the opposite: growing up in a hard-core anti-union state, but witnessing the power and strength that labor unions can bring to graduate students. Then, together, we share a "how-to," with tips and instructions on how others can recreate the unionizing we did at their own institutions.

Brian's Experience

I was always a Civil Service exam away from being a third-generation letter carrier. My father and his father both retired from the United States Postal Service with pensions and medical insurance for themselves and their wives. In fact, when the Post Office workers struck in 1970, my grandfather was part of what Eric Loomis calls "the nation's largest ever wildcat strike" (183).

"Starting in New York City in the early morning hours of March 18, 1970, and for the next 8 days, over 200,000 postal workers in 12 states struck 671 post offices in dozens of cities and towns across the country" (Rubio 65). This move was made despite the fact that, as federal workers, it was illegal to collectively bargain, and the strike itself was done despite the fact that postal "union national leaders opposed the strike" (Rubio 66). Here they were, 200,000 strong, in defiance of the law and union leadership, walking off the job and protesting.

In an effort to show strength and crush the strike, as well as discourage members of the post office who wouldn't cross the picket lines, then-President Nixon attempted to show the striking post office workers they weren't needed. Nixon "dispatched 23,000 United States Armed Forces personnel to New York City to process the mail, but without proper training, there was no way they could do the job" ("The Great Postal Strike of 1970"). This failed attempt prompted the government to begin negotiating with the post office unions, the very thing the law was meant to prohibit. In the aftermath of the strike, not only did a pay raise go through, but no "single striker was fired, and postal unions won full collective bargaining rights" (Rubio 66). If one thing was made clear in this instance: the power is always with the numbers, and the workers always have the numbers.

This triumph is part of my understanding: even when they tell you there's something you can't do (like strike or join a union), my family history runs counter to those ideas. So the idea that unionizing is illegal or strikes are off the table was never my reality–even when told "you can't," we did. This defiance is part of my DNA, and this attitude would be important later as I moved to the South.

I took for granted the fact that growing up, unions were normal. My cousin's husband is a union carpenter. My best friend in high school's father was a union welder. My teachers were in unions in public school. It was just kind of part of the public sector and the trades, at least for anyone who was making a living in those fields. I didn't realize that unions were deeply engrained in my own state's culture. In fact, in New Jersey, the state's constitution, Article 1, Section 19 currently reads: "Persons in private employment shall have the right to organize and bargain collectively. Persons in public employment shall have the right to organize, present to and make known to the State, or any of its political subdivisions or agencies, their grievances and proposals through representatives of their own choosing." While this can be nebulous regarding the state's view of a public sector worker's ability to collectively bargain, clarification is offered by the Public Employment Relations Commission (PERC) Law, which states:

> The Public Employment Relations Act authorizes collective negotiations in New Jersey's public sector. The law establishes and protects the process of negotiations as the State's established public policy to determine terms and conditions of employment for public employees, including eligible school employees. Although the law requires that public employers, upon their organized employees' request, participate in bargaining and the law establishes what issues must be bargained, the law does not impose resolution of negotiable issues upon the parties contract. (1)

In other words, State employees are *also* guaranteed the right to collectively bargain. The fact that this is *in the law* demonstrated that the right for everyone to bargain collectively is important enough to the citizens of New Jersey and the state itself that it is written into and protected by the State's constitution.

Unions were a fact for me, but not *everyone* I knew was in one. And early on, I saw the difference in those holding union memberships compared to those who did not. I grew up watching my father take two weeks of paid vacation a year. He stayed home sick when he got sick. When I was in an accident as a teenager, he took time off work and never had to worry he'd get fired or be replaced by his job. My mother, on the other hand, worked as a nurse in private practice, and never had these luxuries. She never carried the insurance, she never got paid time off, and she worked every bit as hard. Early on, unions looked like the better deal.

In my youth, working mostly in restaurants, I never had a union. Long hours, dangerous moments, but enough pay to keep the worry away. Plus, I had the invulnerability of youth on my side. When I worked for a year in Heating and Air Conditioning, the company that hired me (albeit with no experience) was not a union shop. You could tell by the low pay and bad hours, with no benefits to speak of. Even then, as I compared the work I was doing with the union equivalents, I realized there was never any reason NOT to unionize. When I went back to school to ultimately end up teaching, I took that eventuality with me: I'd be a union teacher.

Then I got to Texas for graduate school. And the difference was more than night and day, more than a slight cultural shift. When it came to workers and unions, I felt like I was in a foreign country or alternate universe. We–the graduate student workers–were underpaid, underfunded, and under supported. And many of us didn't realize just how bad it really was until we were in the thick of it.

I can remember the look on the face of a colleague of mine when he found out he owed money to the college. When he explained he'd gotten a bill for over a thousand dollars I was

sure he was joking. “No,” I said. “We teach two classes, and we get two for free. That’s the deal.”

“That’s what I thought, too,” he replied, with that look I can still see. Confusion. Regret. The look of someone who played by all the rules and still got screwed.

It didn’t take long to find out the problem. We worked as student workers in a school that didn’t fully fund. While it was true we received free tuition for two classes, we didn’t get anything towards the fees and, at the time of attendance, fees outpriced tuition. I would go on to find out (again, the hard way, through experience) that if we opted to take an additional class, we then had to pay the tuition for that class *as well as* an even higher fee amount that skyrocketed into a whole new level of expense. In other words, we were quite literally paying to work at our institution.

Ideally as part of the acceptance procedure, one would find out whether a program is fully-funded, partially-funded, or not funded. However, I didn’t have a deep bench of college attendees to ask about this, and made a fundamental mistake: I assumed, much like my friend, that “teach two classes get two classes free” meant we hadn’t negotiated away what free meant. And much to my shock, I was wrong.

From that moment on, during every orientation, I made it a personal point to explain to every new Graduate Assistant Teacher (GAT) the money they would still owe. I also corrected a mistake in our collective understanding about financial aid. I was told in no uncertain terms that GATs were ineligible for financial aid, to the point where I hurriedly canceled mine. Thankfully, when I found out about the money I owed I did some research, learned the error in that message, and was able to re-file and receive financial aid. But, in the ultimate stroke of “Pay to Work Here,” I graduated with a PhD and almost a quarter of a million dollars in student loan debt. To teach. It's my fault that my second job all through grad school was adjunct professor at the school I received my master’s degree from. Poverty wages don’t offset poverty wages.

I knew we needed help, an advocate; and, pulling from my experience and upbringing, I knew unions were the answer. But there wasn’t one anywhere to be found on campus. It's hard to explain how alien it was to find a mid-sized university without something like a student or grad student union. The kind of organization I assumed would be in place as a matter of course was absent. Moreover, the rank-and-file student with whom I would later broach the topic was either misinformed about the legality of a union or downright hostile to the notion as somehow anti-worker. It’s the clearest success of any anti-union movement I’d ever seen.

Rachel’s Experience

I had quite literally never heard of a real-life, active union. I thought they were all dead.

I was raised in Rockwall, Texas, a county bordering the east side of Dallas. The town is small (literally—the entire town is only around 33 square miles, and the county is the smallest in Texas). For many years, it was rural, with only pockets of stores and businesses and houses scattered among acres of empty land and pastures. My grandparents moved there in the early 70s and still live in the original home they bought. Around that time, my grandmother founded a real-estate company, Regal Realtors, which grew to be quite successful in our little town; as children, whenever we saw her unique purple signs, we would proudly proclaim, “My Nana

owns Regal!" I learned to drive on asphalt backroads and in cow pastures, grew up fishing and chasing fireflies. The community was close-knit, with families that my Nana referred to as "old Rockwall folks," many of which were her own family. I used to joke that I was related to half of the town.

Rockwall has changed quite a bit over the years. Those 33 square miles are now densely packed with over 53,000 people (according to the 2024 census). There are not just pockets of stores and businesses anymore—there are huge stores, restaurants, and strip centers on almost every corner. The cow pastures and asphalt roads I learned to drive on are now multi-laned paved roads and massive housing developments. But despite all that, Rockwall has always had a small-town feel. My grandmother has since retired and sold her company, but still to this day when I see a purple Regal Realtors sign, I think, "That's Nana's." Even though there are lots of new people, there are plenty of old Rockwall folks, too. "Oh I worked with your grandmother," "I went to high school with your mother," or "I know your cousin so-and-so," are phrases I'm accustomed to.

I think this small-town feel is why, despite its growth and progress, Rockwall, Texas is still deeply conservative. According to the city's own statistics, in the last three presidential elections, almost 70% of citizens voted overwhelmingly for Republican candidates on all national, state, and local levels of government ("2016 Results"; "2020 Results"; "2024 Results"). Lately, around election seasons, the Rockwall Republican Party hosts what they call "Trump Trains," massive lines of cars driving through the town. On their event page, they state "all vehicles are welcome and MUST be decorated showing support for President Trump (homemade signs are welcome)" (Rockwall GOP, emphasis original). For several months after the 2020 election, people lined up on Horizon Road, which overpasses I-30, holding up signs that read "Trump Won" and protesting the results of the election. And when he won the 2024 election, countless celebrations and parties were held all over town.

This was the culture that was ingrained in me. This was the life I lived. I think I can count on one hand the amount of Democrats I knew growing up. I say all of this to drive home the point I opened with: unions were essentially non-existent where I was raised. Sure, I learned about them in history classes when we talked about the early beginnings of American labor. But as far as I knew, labor unions were a thing of the past, a thing only present in history books. In fact, when Brian approached me and suggested we look at joining a union, I think I literally said, "Wait, those are real?"

My experience is not unique simply because I grew up in the smallest county of Texas. While some people might not have been quite as unaware as me (in that they thought unions didn't exist), many Texans believe that there are none in the state, or that to join one is illegal. Rob D'Amico, the Texas American Federation of Teachers Communication Director, wrote, "Invariably, someone responds to one of my Facebook posts — where I often use the word 'union' to describe Texas AFT — with a vehement objection. 'There are no unions in Texas!' or 'Unions are illegal in Texas!'" Texas has long been known as an anti-union state. In fact, several authors all used the same word to describe the State's attitude towards unions: hostile (Salinas; Amberg; Maroney and Glasburd). So, although there are unions present in the state, they certainly are not embraced with excitement by either the government or the people.

Perhaps this is because of Texas' Western-cowboy culture that has a "pull yourself up by the bootstraps" attitude. Or perhaps it's the deep-seated "we don't need you" mentality rooted in Texas history. After breaking away from Mexico in 1836, Texas was its own nation for almost ten years before joining the United States ("No, Texas Can't Legally Secede"). Despite being a part of the country (and receiving Federal support), every few years, there is talk of Texas seceding and reestablishing itself as its own country. In 2009, then-governor Rick Perry said, "When we came into the nation in 1845, we were a republic; we were a stand-alone nation. And one of the deals was we could leave whenever we want, so we're kind of thinking of that again" (qtd Holley). In 2022, Texas Senator Ted Cruz hinted at secession saying, "We're not there yet," but quickly following up with the implication that it is a strong possibility: "I think we take NASA, we take the military, we take the oil," he confidently claimed (qtd Holley). Texas seems to have a culture of not just independence, but almost one of isolation.

Often, Texans express feeling threatened by outsiders. In his book *The Seven Keys to Texas,* historian T.R. Fehrenbach suggests that Texas culture pushes against change and hasn't "altered all that much in 150 years" (117). He goes on to explain, "Times change, fads and foibles change…But most of these changes in Texas have occurred less from evolution or choice than pressure. Virtually all the political and social reforms of the twentieth century enacted by government have been forced down the Anglo-Texan throat" (117). *New York Times* journalist and proud Texan Manny Fernandez echoes this, writing, "People throughout the state [of Texas] say they believe that their way of life is under assault and that they are making a kind of last stand by simply being Texan. It is this fear, anger, and sometimes paranoia that lurks beneath the surface of Texas politics."

With this in mind, of course Texans feel hesitant to embrace labor unions: they are seen as a group of outsiders coming in, telling people how to run their business. Maroney and Glasund explain that "Texas's great size and its many small, isolated communities" breeds "a suspicious and hostile environment towards labor unions" (4). Amberg calls it "the contemporary post-facto image of Texas as one member of a category of conservative or nonunion states versus liberal or union-friendly states" (147). In other words, it's us versus them, the unions versus the good Texas folk, the outsiders versus the insiders.

Fehrenbach also explains extensively the way the evolution of Texas economy has led to a strong anti-union attitude. When white settlers arrived, they "created the first true Texan economy" via agriculture and farming. Texas became known as "the Cotton Kingdom," and, like many colonial plantations and farms, slaves made up not only a large part of the economy, but most of the labor on cotton farms (Fehrenbach 47-52). After the Union's victory in the Civil War, one would think the cotton industry suffered, but "The Cotton Kingdom" stood strong and actually grew with the use of sharecropping and led to Texas cotton being exported to Europe.

Another major factor in Texas economy arose in the 1800s: ranching. Texas became the national leader in production and sales of cows, beef, leather, and all things bovine, earning itself another royal title: "The Cattle Kingdom" (Fehrenbach 52). "Cowboy culture, with its own loyalties, loneliness, manhood rites and version of the code duello" became iconically linked to Texas culture (Fehrenbach 52). "Cattle barons" (a term for ranchers who came to Texas and established large, successful ranches) began to pop up all over the state. Initially,

ranching and cowboy culture was viewed as a lifestyle an individual could adopt. But as ranches grew (both in number and in size), running a ranch began to look less like a lifestyle and more like a business. Instead of the labor structure made up of slave-owners and slaves or land-owners and sharecroppers (as it was on cotton farms), ranches were structured by a three-tiered hierarchy: the rancher (or owner), the foreman (or overseer), and the hired-hands (the laborers themselves) (Fehrenbach 65). In other words, ranches looked much more like a corporate business, with multiple levels of management. And as ranching took off, so too did the number of laborers they needed. "By the 1880s ranching has become such a business as opposed to a way of life that cowhands, now too numerous and feeling oppressed [...] sometimes tried to strike–but those little known and scattered labor actions were doomed" (Fehrenbach 53).

The oil boom in Texas produced a similar style of business: more layers of management, more and more laborers needed. And as Texas economy grew, so too did the need for buildings and infrastructure, leading to construction being a major business in the state. But as the economy shifted and changed, there was still a common narrative about Texas: here, anyone could build a "personal empire." Even as things have modernized and businesses have changed, the layout of business infrastructure remains largely the same: "owners and employees, with lines sharply drawn and few layers of management in-between" (62).

Take all of these factors: intense individualism; a "we-don't-need-you" attitude; a bootstrap mentality; the mythos of the self-built empire; the lines divided between business owners and laborers. Mix them all together, and what do you get? Answer: an environment that is naturally suspicious and hostile towards collective labor efforts like unions. Texas laborers are expected to channel their ancestors' determination, push aside any intruders, and reject all forms of help in order to establish their own *individual* success. Fehrenach writes, "It follows that, although great wealth *can* be created in such an infrastructure, it is not necessarily widely diffused, and labor unions are relatively few and weak. Labor is mostly unorganized, and labor organizations lack economic and political power" (64).

So, when Brian suggested that union membership might be the way to go for graduate students, I didn't know such a thing was possible. In his story, Brian mentioned that union membership is so valued and cherished, it's written into New Jersey's constitution. But in Texas, it's a different story. Title 6 of our state code reads "An official of the state or of a political subdivision of the state may not enter into a collective bargaining contract with a labor organization regarding wages, hours, or conditions of employment of public employees" ("Government Code Title 6"). In other words, while in New Jersey protects and values collective bargaining and labor organizations (to the point it protects them in the state constitution), in Texas they are actively and officially *discouraged*. While unions are technically legal, by removing collective bargaining, they've lost their teeth: what good is a union if you're not allowed to collectively bargain? This also likely contributes to the misbelief that unions are "illegal" in our State.

When I heard Brian share his experience with unions, I had my doubts and unsureness, but was willing to try; I didn't know what unions even were, but I wanted to believe in them. Although the idea was totally foreign to me, I knew something needed to change, which meant we needed to try something different. Of course, when we began to propose the idea to our

colleagues, we were met with that inherent Texas mindset. Many were quick to say, "Oh we can't do that—unions are illegal in Texas." Others were vehemently against it, arguing that unions were inevitably bad or corrupt. And still others encouraged us to just be patient, to work within the system, and to just wait for the upper admin and those in charge to notice us. But that felt like waiting under the table for a few breadcrumbs to be dropped—sure, it might happen, but it wouldn't be any time soon, wouldn't be nearly enough to sustain us, and certainly wouldn't be because we felt seen or heard. Although union membership was unknown to me, it seemed to be the only way to make our voices heard.

We researched and gathered information and ultimately decided that the Texas State Employees Union was the right one for us. As we spread the word to our coworkers and fellow graduate student employees, we were still met with claims like "I can't do that." One friend even shared, "My advisor told me not to, because it could harm the likelihood of me getting a job." Our union presence was ultimately very small—Brian, me, and a handful of other colleagues. But it was there, nonetheless.

Over time, the union came to our support time and time again. What was perhaps the most eye-opening occurrence for me was when the union came to support our fight against raising student fees and tuition. The university began to enter discussion of raising student fees and tuition, something that we found unbelievable when we considered the thousands of dollars we still had to pay in fees (despite being graduate student workers making very little money). Brian suggested we go to the union for help. I was doubtful—why would a labor union care about a university's tuition and fees costs? Although it *did* impact us as graduate student workers, it didn't seem a full-fledged labor issue to me. I fully expected our TSEU rep to kindly say, "Sorry, but we can't really help."

But, to my surprise, the union came in full force. They drove over an hour to our rural university, with tables and signs and thousands of fliers and people to hand them out. They started an online petition that gained thousands of signatures. They created an email campaign that made it easy for supporters to email upper-admin and even the board of regents, expressing dissent over the rising costs. There were QR codes on the fliers and social media links for people to share. The amount of backing we had from TSEU was a shock to me.

And, even more to my surprise, it worked. Not long after, the university announced the costs would remain the same.

Seeing how our union not only *cared* about us, but also came to our aid and advocated for us on a large scale in our time of need, was a huge cannon shot in the anti-union fortress where I had lived my entire life. That was when it became very real to me: collective efforts and unionizing is a strong, powerful way to advocate for ourselves. And we needed this.

I'm now a firm believer that *all* graduate student workers— some of the most often overlooked, mistreated, and underrepresented in their institutions—need union support. Really, I think *all* workers should consider a union. I guess you could say I joined the cause. It can work, but it has to start like it did for us: a group of people who feel fed up and frustrated and want to try something different. Unionizing is the answer. Together we are strong. You'll get pushback, you'll get discouragement, but if you stay the course, it will work.

Trust me. I've seen it first-hand.

How To

In the interest of helping any graduate student workers or other vulnerable populations, the concrete steps we took to affect our immediate situation, as well as leave a legacy of better representation and pay behind are outlined below. Feel free to adopt any as you are able, and remember: we made much of this up on the fly. Utilizing the structures you may already have on campus or in your workplace will only make this easier.

1) Talk to Each Other

This is the first rule of organizing. Talk CONSTANTLY. And talk about everything.

The first attitude one must overcome in order to successfully organize graduate student labor in a climate hostile to the idea is to open dialogue about the taboo subject of money. We were able to do this from the collective shock of realizing we didn't get free classes when we taught for pennies. Then, the knowledge of that began to spread at future orientations, all to mitigate the shock of the fees for new GATs, as well as to inform them of their right to borrow to offset the poor wages.

There is a real cultural taboo when it comes to talking about money and paychecks. But fight the urge to keep it a secret. There were times we took out paystubs and literally compared them side by side. "They're paying you *how much?* Well they're paying me a couple of hundred less!" We talked to our colleagues about how much we paid in fees, how much insurance was costing us, even how much we received for travel funding when attending conferences (which, by the way, was never *actually* enough to cover the trip, but that's another story entirely).

Talking is important for a few reasons. The first is it helps you to know what to work towards. If you all speak up, you all know what you're collectively dealing with, and can begin to strategize about how to collectively solve the problem. It also can keep everyone informed and in the loop, so they know what to expect. For example, when we both first started our positions as graduate students, no one told us that, despite starting work in August, we wouldn't see a paycheck until "the new fiscal year," which was October 1. That meant we worked for over a month with literally no income to show. It was a struggle, and we were both caught off guard; but every semester after that, we made sure to tell all incoming GAs "Hey, heads up: you're not gonna get paid until October 1. Have a plan."

Lastly (and maybe most importantly), talking takes everyone out of isolation and brings us together, which is a way to take back power. Karl Marx and Freidrich Engels write in *The Communist Manifesto*:

> [T]he labourers still form an incoherent mass scattered over the whole country, and broken up by their mutual competition. [...] This union is helped on by the improved means of communication that are created by modern industry, and that place the workers of different localities in contact with one another. It was just this contact that was needed to centralise the numerous local struggles, all of the same character, into one national struggle between classes.

In other words, isolation and separation is a tool that those in power use to keep the workers (or, in our case, graduate students) overworked, underpaid, and in their place. We see this in the silo mentality of colleges: History over there, Math over here, and never the two shall cross

paths. Even within departments, there are little mini-silos keeping us apart: tenured or full-time professors congregate here; graduate employees over there; while adjuncts are often kept isolated just outside the doors. Keep them apart, and they can't talk to each other. Furthermore, the relative scarcity of tenure and tenure-track teaching jobs can have the effect of making adjunct and other on-demand workers look like a threat. This is all by design of course, because once people break that barrier and shatter the taboo around sharing pay information, it makes discrepancies visible and combating them possible. But talking–sharing concerns, struggles, and issues together–brings people together and motivates change. One by one, we begin to recognize, "Wait, you're getting screwed over…me too! Let's work together and fight back!"

2) Find and Recruit Allies

Without the existing infrastructure, it was difficult to build a student union from the ground up, especially in my (Brian's) first two years in Texas. The discussions around fees as well as our terrible paychecks culminated in sympathy from some tenured faculty. This is where we'd find the cover for some of our stealthier operations later; in the early stages, though, our faculty allies began when we joined SEGAD (Spanish and English Graduate Advancement and Development), an English club that had been dormant for some time. The faculty advisor for this club was among our first and definitely our fiercest advocates in the department, and she was integral in getting our first meeting off the ground.

Under the guise of a "meet-and-greet" with the new Graduate School Dean (then acting), we held an airing of grievances. From the look on her face, it's clear she had not expected this. We each explained our situations—how little we made, how much the school still took, and the plight of the international students, who depended on the university only for their whole source of income and *still* had to pay the fees. They were unable to work off-campus and juggle another job like most of us had to. After the dean slunk away from our "meet-and-greet-turned-bombardment," the stirrings of a plan developed: we would write a campaign of letters, detailing our plight. Anonymize them, then have them delivered to the graduate school. But for this, we needed coverage— namely, someone with tenure.

We were uniquely aware of the precarity of our jobs, as well as our lack of power, being student workers. It didn't matter that we were instructors of record for the classes we taught, we were still looked at as assistants—easily replaceable. Those in our cohort who were international students on visas were uniquely and especially aware that they might lose everything if the school should retaliate. We needed to shield the more vulnerable among us, and we needed someone to deliver the letters who the graduate school would be receptive to. It didn't take long to find allies— this meeting was evidently as eye-opening to our instructors in attendance as it was to our new graduate school dean. They heard our stories and joined our cause. Remember that part about talking? Talk to your professors, too. They might not know how little the school thinks you're worth, and it might be in their wheelhouse to remind them.

The next phase here was what Brian liked to call "herding cats." While many among us had no qualms about vocalizing concerns to the graduate school acting dean, there was something about committing these grievances to paper that caused many to falter. We found ourselves walking the halls on days off, rallying the troops, using the carrot when possible. We decided early on to leave the international students out for this phase, as we couldn't assuage

their fears, even writing anonymously, so we had to rely on a subset of us to get the message across. That made getting every letter we could very important.

Over the course of the next two months, we got around twenty letters— heartbreakers, really. The reality of this seemingly prestigious student-worker opportunity was laid bare as the sham it was. Hearing it in different voices, to different degrees, brought that home. We had the letters delivered by a tenured professor, who scrubbed names and any references too specific to leave in there, again for fear of reprisal.

3) DIY is Your Best Friend

In the time the letters were being cajoled and drafted, we were invited into a graduate class to speak about the progress. The instructor was one of our earliest allies and had us come and bring information as we gathered it— everything from the Financial Aid lie being debunked to residency rules we were learning on the fly (during a separate but no less tenacious battle).

This instructor used her privilege to have her class members who were in the same boat as us (underpaid, overworked, and underrepresented) to make 'zines— cartoonish examples of the life of a graduate student, as a graduate student worker. The official story is that these "*ended up"* all over campus. But we knew: every one we laid out was intentional. Key points of distribution were chosen for foot traffic— the library, the student center, etc. And *maybe*, one evening, after a grad class, someone didn't lock the door to the lobby outside the president's office. *Maybe* some of the 'zines ended up on a coffee table where those waiting to meet the president might have seen them. We don't know, there were stories to that effect…who knows? We didn't think much of it after that.

In less than three months, that very same semester at our department's holiday party held just before the Fall semester ended we got word: we were getting a raise. Of fifty percent. Immediately. All doctoral students in English who taught would see their pay increase.

In just a few short months, we'd managed to get enough voices behind our request to where the graduate school couldn't ignore us, and the money we needed was suddenly *found*. The administration said something along the lines of "We'll need to secure long-term funding for the raises," however, that's an administration problem, not a worker problem. Once you get something like that in the books they can't take it away.

Of course, they were quick to couch this behind "Don't ask for anything else," but that must be part of it. They wanted us to be quiet, so they tried to buy us off. But in those initial moments, it didn't matter: we had won.

And, of course: it wouldn't be the last time they heard from us. We got wind of a tuition and fee increase shortly thereafter, and we all know how that worked out in our favor as well.

4) Organize Anyway

They'll tell you that you can't. They'll say it's illegal. It's not. If you can't get sufficient groundswell to organize yourselves, or even to fold into an existing, bigger union, know that as an individual you are free to join a union.

After some research, a few of us ended up in the Texas State Employees' Union. Know, however, that this is not the only approach. We did kick around the idea of forming our own union. There exist great resources and willing advocates who can and will travel to you and

show you how to get a union off the ground. United Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers of America, for example, provide a handy how-to no matter your stage in organizing: The Five Basic Steps to Organizing a Union | UE Other colleges have rolled into existing unions, and we chose to individually join the union we felt like had the most applicability to us. In hindsight, it ended up being a great idea, as our first organizer was a fantastic one.

We had a union table set up at the following orientation, hoping to grab new members as they entered the school, before any settling-in of the anti-union attitude, and we called on our organizer every time we wanted to get something on campus. Heck, she called us sometimes because she just felt like coming out to organize.

Remember: you can always get permission to set up a protest and all that. This is still, at the time of writing at least, America. And you can explain to any campus or local police that come to your table that the first amendment is part and parcel of your efforts on campus. This we learned from our organizer, and this we carry to this day.

5) Show Up. Even Alone.

Sometimes all it takes is just one voice. One person saying, "Hey, this isn't right. Let's talk about it."

When the university was talking about raising tuition and fees, we worried we might be alone, but the union showed up in force to hand out fliers. Our union organizer also taught us how to respond to interference. She showed us where we could and couldn't stand, things we could and couldn't do, and how to stand up for ourselves if threatened in any way. Whenever a university police officer approached us, whether at a table or wandering around campus handing out these flyers, we learned to greet officers with "I'm exercising my first amendment rights." We got used to saying this first, even before a "hello," to provide appropriate context for our actions. Being approached by university officers or other school employees and receiving push-back wasn't a big surprise; but it was when we were met with student resistance. "You're not allowed to leave these around," we would hear from undergraduates and graduate students alike. "Stop it," is how we interpreted that. But we didn't let it deter us: our response was similar to the 'zines, as well as the mini-rally, we just did it anyway.

As we passed out fliers out to students, we told everyone of an open hearing the school would be holding where anyone–students, faculty, administration, staff–could come and voice their concerns. *Tons* of students said, "Oh yeah, we'll be there." Faculty members promised the same. We started to get excited. We expected to show up to that meeting with a crowd full of outraged students and faculty behind us. We thought it would be incredible.

And then, the day of, it was just the two of us.

Well, not entirely. There were other people in the room. The president of the university, the then-provost, some folks from the budget offices. A member of our campus radio station also came and covered a story on it (invited by us, of course: the more attention, the better). But as for students, it was just us: two lone graduate student workers.

Initially, there was anger. *Where are all the students?* we thought. *The ones who said they'd come? Who seemed outraged and angry when we put the flier in their hands? What about all the faculty who said they'd support us? Where are they?*

They bailed.

But despite that, we both stood when the mic became open, and aired our grievances and concerns. It seemed initially that we were met with dismissal and disinterest. When we mentioned how the raise in costs would impact graduate student workers like ourselves, and share our own experiences–the ways we struggle, how we could hardly afford basic living needs, the amount we still had to pay in fees despite all the hard work we put in–we were met with indifference. One particular member of administration looked us dead in the eye, shrugged, and said, "We've never had a problem with GA retention, so I don't think it will be a problem."

We walked away feeling defeated. Like no one actually cared. Not the students, not the faculty, and certainly not the administration. The fight felt over and done.

And then a few weeks later, the university announced they would not be raising tuition and fees after all. Of course, they credited it to their care and concern and careful discretion. But when I talked about it with a friend (who, coincidentally, worked as an administrative assistant in one of the upper-level offices), she leaned in and quietly informed me that behind closed doors, the real reason was they didn't want more trouble from those pesky union grad students.

6) Know Your Worth

Getting a PhD in the climate we face in America is an unsure position. There's no way to know if you'll land a job teaching, if that's what you want, or if you'll end up in some post-Doc purgatory. "In 1995, 75 percent of all teaching positions on college campuses were full-time and tenure track . . . Twenty years later, by 2015, the reverse was true: 75 percent of all teaching positions are now temporary or adjunct positions" (McAlevey 90). Adjuncts and Graduate Student Workers have more in common than they have differences. A way to spread your message to other vulnerable populations is right there in front of you.

It's also important to know the numbers. Anecdotally from administration we heard that as much as 85 percent of Freshman Comp classes were taught by graduate students. Imagine the power we had, should we have been able to capitalize on it. Getting the groundwork laid sooner might have afforded us the ability to use those numbers to our advantage, however, there's no reason others can't start here. If your school is a state school, they're usually quite good at publishing budgets, and most departments will know the ratio of full-time professors to grad students. Using this data in your posters, using this as leverage, even using this as a way to convince others to be sympathetic to your cause is invaluable. The numbers, as they say, don't lie.

7) Remember: This isn't just about you. It's about everyone.

Marx and Engels write, "Now and then the workers are victorious, but only for a time. The real fruit of their battles lies, not in the immediate result, but in the ever expanding union of the workers." In other words, it won't always be win after win. Sometimes you'll lose. Sometimes you'll think, *This is never going to change, and I'm never going to see the end of this thing.* And, you might not. Things might not change at that moment. But you're laying down the groundwork, and leaving a legacy.

It would have been easy to pull for ourselves. We could have petitioned the administration to grant raises on an individual basis, or on length of service, or introduce some other structure

that might have benefited a few of us upfront with the idea that it gets better later. All those notions were rejected because, as a rising tide lifts all boats, sometimes you've gotta be the tide.

In the first few years of our unionizing efforts, we introduced a school with no infrastructure for representation to the beauty of on-campus organizing. We enrolled a number of members for the Texas State Employees Union. We got word that first the raise was made permanent. Then, from continued efforts from those in power behind us, the fees are on their way out. The school is moving to a fully-funded model for Graduate Student workers.

The lasting legacy of continued advocacy is the greatest one we could have hoped for. Graduate students seem easy to ignore, as administration in these situations know that a student-worker, no matter how tenacious, is only a temporary problem. They'll graduate, leave, and move on to cause trouble somewhere else. But an on-campus union presence, with members of administration towing the line, with tenured professors as advocates, means the change can continue beyond the few years any of us are physically on the ground. So our last piece of advice is to keep your eye on systemic change. Sure, win in the moment, like we did with raises and stopping the raise in costs. But also, always be looking forward. Don't forget this is bigger than you. Try to leave everything better than you found it.

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