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# THE FACULTY



## Success and New Hurdles for T. A. Unions

Collective bargaining of graduate students spreads to unprecedented levels, but some universities fight back

BY SCOTT SMALLWOOD

**G**RADUATE STUDENTS arrive shortly before noon at the steps of Temple University's administration building. They've brought hundreds of red balloons, representing the ballots cast by teaching and research assistants in a 290-to-16 vote this spring in favor of unionizing. They've brought a letter for David Adamany, the Temple president, who is seeking to nullify that election. And they've rounded up several ministers and a rabbi.

"Stay strong," one minister tells the students. "Give them the hell that they need."

The balloons rub dangerously against the rough bricks of the Gothic building. *Pop Pop Pop*. The policeman guarding the door smiles.

So what does the president—reviled as a union buster by some—do when graduate students bring him hundreds of balloons, present yet another pleading letter, and round up clergy members who pray that he will change his ways?

He goes to lunch. As the rally continues, Mr. Adamany strolls unnoticed to the faculty dining room, giving little heed to the crowd gathered 30 yards away.

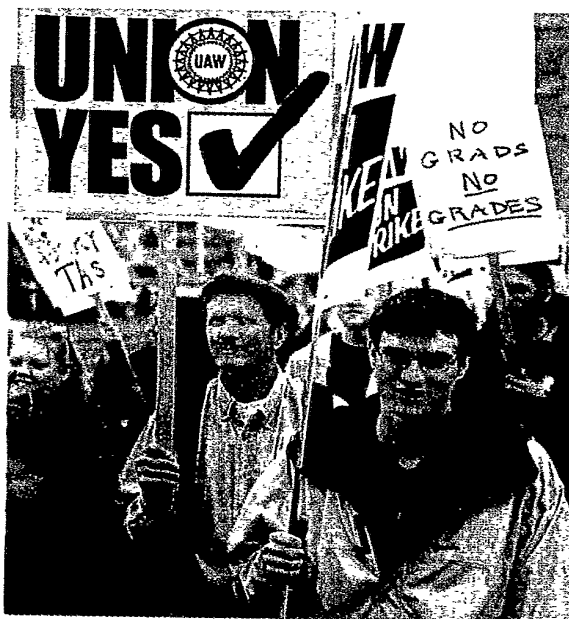
But neither he nor other university administrators can ignore this year of the T.A.—a time when graduate students are signing up for union representation on so many campuses that the news is losing its newness. The success of the United Auto Workers' campaign at New York University, which in March became the first private university to agree to collective bargaining with teaching assistants, has changed the landscape, galvanizing both teaching assistants and the national unions that are eyeing them.

At Temple and at Michigan State University, T.A. unions won elections. At the University of Washington, teaching assistants went on strike. At Columbia University and Brown University, T.A.'s filed petitions seeking recognition. And campaigns are proceeding at Pennsylvania State University, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Maryland at College Park.

### FEARS ABOUT THE PROFESSOR-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP

While the movement is gaining strength—nearly 40,000 graduate students are now union members—administrations are hardly rolling over. Both Columbia and Brown are disputing the petitions before the National Labor Relations Board; the University of Illinois and Temple are making similar cases to state labor boards. Administrators' fears remain that unionization will harm the professor-student relationship as well as academic integrity. And most universities contend that teaching assistants are not employees but students, and so cannot bargain collectively.

At Temple, Mr. Adamany agrees that graduate students



Teaching assistants went on strike at the University of Washington during exam week of the spring semester.

have legitimate complaints. Over the past 30 years, he says, too many Ph.D.'s have been awarded, not enough training has been offered to teaching assistants, and faculty mentors play a lesser role in their lives. "I think many of them feel more remote from the faculty of the university," he says. "They understandably feel like a workforce."

But the standardization brought by a union contract isn't right for academe, and the problems can be fixed outside of collective bargaining, says Mr. Adamany, who fought against the eventual unionization of T.A.'s at Wayne State University, in Detroit, before coming to Temple a year ago.

Similar arguments are made by other administrators, like Anthony Kronman, dean of the Yale University law school, who has witnessed a decade-long battle over the unionization of Yale teaching assistants. "I believe passionately that unionization of graduate students is not the best solution to the problems," he says. "If anything, it solidifies the sense that they are primarily employees and

only secondarily students, which completely reverses the order of things."

Enforcing a workable distinction between economic issues and substantive academic ones—a distinction that the U.A.W. agreed to and that N.Y.U. officials said was crucial in their decision to bargain—will prove impossible in the long run, Mr. Kronman argues. He doesn't have experience with unionized T.A.'s, but points to stories that he finds "unsettling." For instance, the T.A. union at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst at one point pushed for T.A.'s to be assigned based on seniority.

Among union organizers, Mr. Kronman's recent commentary in *The New York Times*, in which he railed against the notion of T.A. unions, has made him the poster child of unenlightened administrators. Pieces like his, they say, seem to suggest that before the N.Y.U. decision, no graduate students anywhere were unionized.

That's hardly the case. Jon Curtiss, an organizer for the American Federation of Teachers in Michigan, has no patience for articles that treat T.A. unions like some sort of aberration: "Jane Smith, a graduate student in anthropology, is not a normal union member." Give me a break, he says. All sorts of professionals are unionized—airline pilots, nurses, teachers. Just because philosophy Ph.D.'s aren't carting lunchboxes to the factory floor doesn't mean they can't bargain collectively. "Gosh, how quaint and unusual that students at these prestigious universities are unionizing," Mr. Curtiss says mockingly. "I'm sick of it. It's not a novelty. We've had these for 30 years."

### CHICKEN LITTLES?

Union leaders see the professors and administrators who oppose their efforts as Chicken Littles. The sky hasn't fallen in at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, or at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, which back in 1969 became the first campus with a T.A. union. They haven't been turned upside down by years of having teaching assistants bargain collectively, union leaders note. At Madison, John D. Wiley, the chancellor, says having unionized T.A.'s hasn't brought chaos, largely because academic details aren't part of the bargaining.

Other administrators, however, argue that unions at public institutions generally operate under state labor laws, which establish guidelines for their behavior—some states prohibit strikes by public employees—that would be absent at a private university, operating under federal law.

Where administrators see such a distinction, though, Mr. Curtiss sees snobbery. "There's a certain elitism about it," he says, switching back to his mocking voice: "Well, unions are OK for the community college or for the state schools, but, by God, this is Yale."

A number of factors contribute to the spread of the

## A CRITICAL MASS

At Temple, Jonathan Rothenmel, a political-science doctoral student, says he originally thought it was a rite of passage to spend so many hours as a teaching assistant. "At first you think, 'I'm going to suck it up. I'll only be

He earned \$10,400 last year, assisting with two classes and teaching a 25-student class on international politics by himself. Like most T.A.'s, some weeks he worked less than the official 20 hours called for by the university, and at other times he worked a lot more. That teaching load means he ends up weighing his academic life against his students'. "When those students are staring you in the face, you don't want to let them down," he says. The pressure prompted Mr. Rothmel to take an incomplete in one of his own courses last fall.

Organizing graduate students seems to be getting easier. Recent elections have been landslides. With all the publicity on campuses, more students are aware of T.A. unions; many paid staff members of the unions, in fact, were once graduate students on unionized campuses. The economic downturn, union leaders say, adds more uncertainty than usual to the job market and increases the support for unions. Organizers at places that have struggled for years were astounded at how quickly the United Auto Workers moved into Columbia and Brown, getting enough sup-

The next big change, organizers predict, will be for universities to stop fighting efforts to create new T.A. unions. That would speed organizing and give groups without the war chest of the United Auto Workers a chance to get involved. For now, organizing T.A.'s on most campuses means bringing along lawyers.




Columbia is making many of the same arguments as  
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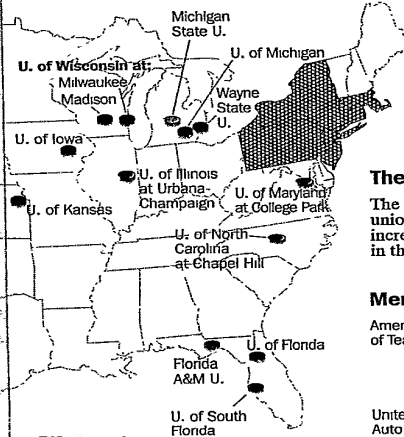
Unionizing activity of teaching assistants has surged in the past year. Some organizing efforts have been more successful than others.

**University of Washington**  
Bogged down in contract negotiations with the administration, teaching assistants at the U. of Washington went on strike during final exams this spring. The university is willing to recognize the United Auto Workers as the bargaining agent for the students who signed union cards, but it says it can't recognize the union as the representative for all T.A.'s without a change in state law.

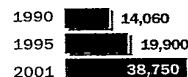
More than 90 percent of the teaching assistants voted to unionize this spring. The university has contested the election, preserving its option of fighting the unionization effort in court. The administration maintains that the graduate assistants are primarily students and don't have collective bargaining rights under state law.

Galvanized by the union victory at New York University, graduate assistants at Columbia filed a petition seeking union recognition this spring. The same lawyers who represented N.Y.U. in its teaching-assistant case are arguing for Columbia in National Labor Relations Board hearings.

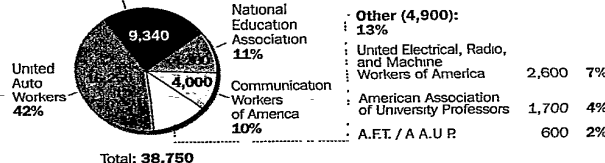
-  Continuing organizing campaigns
-  Universities where T.A.'s have unionized since 1999
-  Universities with previously organized T.A. unions



The number of unionized T.A.'s has increased 175 percent in the past decade.



American Federation  
of Teachers **24%**



SOURCE: CHRONICLE REPORTING

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well: primarily, that teaching assistants are students, not employees.

In a letter to faculty leaders, George Rupp, the university's departing president, has written that the decision in the N.Y.U. case was "wrong on the merits and extremely adverse to the prospects of the relatively few private universities likely to have a union for teaching and research assistants."

That stance indicates that the Columbia's case, now in front of a regional hearing officer, may be headed to the full N.L.R.B. Administrators are "going to the bank on a Bush labor-relations board deciding in their favor," says Christian Sweeney, an organizer at Columbia. "That's certainly a concern for us."

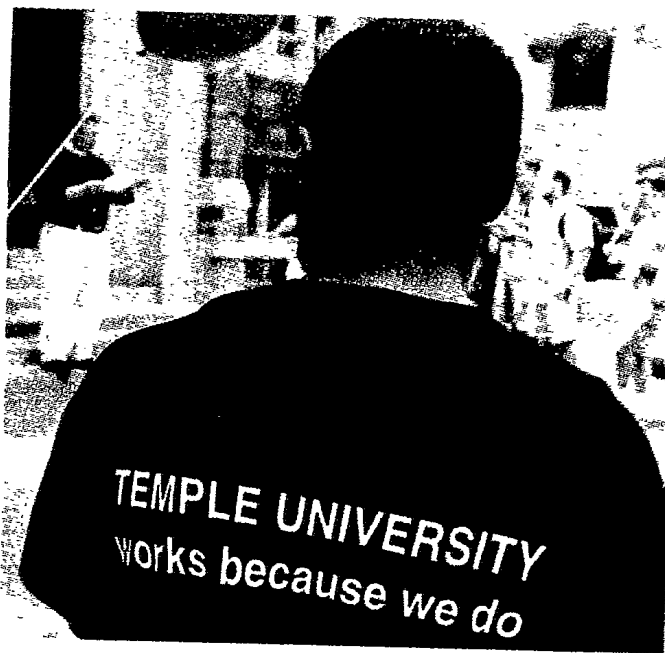
The Bush administration could make as many as four appointments to the five-member N.L.R.B. this year, but that doesn't mean the president will pack the board with Republicans. Though it's not required legally, longstanding custom holds that only three of the members come from the president's party.

Fred Feinstein, who served as the N.L.R.B.'s general counsel for six years during the Clinton administration, doubts that the full board would lightly put aside the N.Y.U. decision. "Board members have understood the importance of precedent and not going up, down, left, right, of avoiding a herky-jerky style that makes it unclear where the board is going at one time," he says.

The N.Y.U. decision, as administrators emphasize, ran counter to previous decisions, but Mr. Feinstein describes it as "carefully considered" and "not so much a reversal but a reflection of a changing reality." He adds, "It would be unfortunate if they raced to overturn it."

#### SOME STRUGGLES

The past year was marked mostly by T.A. organizing victories, but there were losses as well. At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the union was dealt a blow when a state labor board established guidelines that would eliminate almost every teaching assistant from the proposed union by specifying that T.A. duties were for their academic benefit. Other organizing campaigns, including those at Purdue University and the University of Connecticut, have sputtered or died. The biggest obstacle isn't anti-union efforts on the part of administrators; it's the transient nature of graduate school. Student leaders eventually graduate,



JIM LEVITT FOR THE CHRONICLE

*Teaching assistants are angry that Temple U. is challenging their vote to form a union.*

transfer, or otherwise leave, and all that's left of their passion are Web pages full of dead links, explaining why T.A.'s need a union and how that picnic in 1999 went really well.

Even post-N.Y.U., some campaigns just plod along. At Brandeis University, members of an organizing committee have met with fellow students for the past year to talk about issues on the campus. Rekha Rosha, an English Ph.D. student, says the group is still trying to get a handle on how many T.A.'s are there, and to understand how Brandeis's assistantship financing works.

#### A BEHIND-THE-SCENES FIGHT

Another hurdle for organizing efforts is a behind-the-scenes squabble between two national unions. The American Federation of Teachers is worried that the United Auto Workers made a strategic error by agreeing to remove academic issues from the table at N.Y.U.—a deal that other universities are seeking to use as precedent in their own negotiations.

Rob Callahan, the A.F.T. organizer at Temple, says the union doesn't have a problem with striking a deal that would limit the scope of bargaining. "I think the problem is with drawing the line between academic issues and employee issues, rather than student and employee," he says. "Since we're academic workers, many of our work issues are academic ones." He's worried that an agreement similar to the one at N.Y.U. would make bargaining about some issues, like class size and employee training, more difficult than it should be.

Lisa Jessup, the U.A.W. organizer at N.Y.U., bristles at such criticism. "I think that's totally misreading what the agreement is," she says. "We waived no rights in this agreement. I don't know where they get that."

Meanwhile, the U.A.W. is frustrated with what it sees as the A.F.T.'s attempts to horn in—so far unsuccessfully—on organizing efforts in New York among adjuncts at N.Y.U. and teaching assistants at Columbia. Organizers say privately that a turf battle isn't necessary. There are plenty of unorganized teaching assistants to go around.

#### BUILDING ON VICTORIES

Some of them are at Penn, where the A.F.T. is seeking to build on its victory at nearby Temple. At Penn, there are no vigils outside the president's office, no letters demanding recognition, no ministers, and no balloons. There are, instead, five people sitting outside a coffeehouse near the campus on a hazy June morning, plotting the revolution.

One student reports on her conversation with a local labor leader. The incipient organizers dream that the university—which hasn't taken an official stance on T.A. unionization—will not fight the organizing effort. They schedule training for six new organizers that afternoon, and coordinate more training for a couple of leaders in Newark, N.J., the next week.

Later, after the coffeehouse gathering breaks up, two of the activists head off to meet with a real-estate agent about renting an office. "Excuse the cell phone," says Mark Bostic, an A.F.T. staff organizer and veteran of the battle at Temple, as he holds the phone in one hand and his calendar in the other. "Until we get an office, this is my office."

The cell phone brings bad news: the broker has canceled. It's a minor setback; time to regroup. Mr. Bostic turns to the student walking alongside him and asks the only question that matters in the year of the T.A.: "Do you want to go do some organizing?"