

March 7, 2016

Dear Fellow GESO Members,

Excuse me, local 33! Wow. What an achievement! I am in awe of what you have accomplished and wish I could have been there to share the moment with you. Maintaining an organization in struggle without formal recognition for almost two decades is a stunning achievement. Those that came before you are proud and humbled to be associated with you.

You may know that I was a member of GESOs first organizing staff. With Ellen Thompson as our lead organizer, and along with Kathy Newman, Eve Weinbaum, Gordon Lafer, Tracy Ardren and our union President Ivana Krajinovic, we were at the helm of the first union card drive and we mounted the first labor actions under the GESO mantle.

We were green and enthusiastic and we learned awfully fast. We took the salaries we would have been paid as Teaching Assistants. I remember the number well, \$3,200 per semester, or a grand total of \$6,400 a year. I had a tuition waiver, but even paying \$300 per month rent to live in a run down house in Fair Haven, I had to take out loans and work every day of the summer to finance graduate school.

I'm not claiming hardship, just putting things in perspective. Even before I left Yale in 1995, graduate student stipends and salaries had increased substantially, a direct response to our organizing, though Yale of course repeatedly denied this fact.

As you know, our struggle has never been solely about wages. Beguiled by the promise of opening spigots of foundation money, then Yale provost Frank Turner sought to make a name for himself by "speeding up the time to degree," which effectively meant cutting PhD students off after 6-years, including ending their medical insurance, and visa protections in the case of foreign students. After years of efforts to improve material conditions for graduate student employees, this plan announced by fiat, and without any consultation broke things open in my opinion.

When I arrived at Yale, our predecessor organization TA Solidarity had been petitioning unsuccessfully for several years to improve wages and working conditions of graduate student Teaching Assistants. When the organization failed to authorize a grade strike, and then was unable to convince a plurality of its members to consider unionization, it folded. It had been a noble effort, but in many ways we had to start over from scratch.

The relatively small group of us committed to the unionization path began to pursue the issue with very little knowledge of what we were doing. We started researching other graduate student unions, mostly at public universities, and interviewing prospective unions to work with us, starting with the United Auto Workers (UAW). The UAW offered us a lot of resources -- right up front -- an office and an organizing budget. It was flattering, but also a little scary to be honest. Did I say, we had no idea what we were doing?

The following week we met with representatives from Locals 34 and 35, unions whose histories many of us knew well and admired. I don't remember exactly who was in the room, but I'll never forget what the 34 and

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35 leaders told us that day. "We won't make you any funding promises. And, anything that we agree to in terms of support will be contingent on ratification by our members. But the one thing we will teach you how to do is to beat Yale."

Just because it's a cliche, doesn't mean it's not true: the rest was history. After that meeting, we had no doubt about the union that we needed to work with going forward. To our immense credit, we understood very well, that our success hinged upon the success of all Yale's workers.

From that day, I don't think I ever worked so hard, or so systematically, and (less proudly) I have not worked that hard or systematically since! As you know, your union is no joke when it comes to organizing. Nothing is left to chance and you can never hide. Everyone must be talked to, repeatedly. You have your numbers for every meeting, for every rally, for every action. And, it is the one instance in life when taking no for an answer, is always provisional. Correction: you never take no for an answer.

As lead organizer in the Humanities Departments, I arguably had the easiest job -- actually there is no argument -- I had the easiest job. American Studies and History were pretty solid union departments, with English and the foreign language departments not far behind. I fancied myself a bit of radical then and played the part, at times to a fault -- like the time I got kicked out of a "negotiating" session with then Graduate Dean Judith Rodin for a take-over of the graduate and professional student senate I had engineered. That was a silly stunt and things got a lot more serious very quickly.

We were lucky too because several (by no means most) of our faculty, especially the late David Montgomery and the ever wonderful Michael Denning supported us. They not only taught us about the beautiful histories of worker's struggles for justice and equality, they pursued a vision of the university as something more than a corporation, but a community responsible for and responsive to all of its members and its surrounding communities as well, a space of learning, solidarity, vision and transformation that to remain vital, needed to radiate outwards.

Many of my comrades and colleagues from those days have gone on to illustrious careers in academia, as public intellectuals, and in the labor movement. I was sorely tempted by the last path, but I can also tell you that if it weren't for GESO and locals 34 and 35, I probably would not have made it as an academic, either. This work has taught all of us how to join intellectual commitment to social action, and to marry ethical and political vision with practical purpose. There could be no better education.

Thank you for allowing me to share these simple reflections with you. I have only gratitude for being a part this amazing community effort over many years. Long live locals 33, 34 and 35!

Faithfully Yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Nikhil Singh".

Nikhil Singh