UNH graduate students move closer to unionizing: Low pay, high housing costs key issues

Ian Lenahan, Foster's Daily Democrat

DURHAM — Hundreds of graduate student workers at the University of New Hampshire are one step closer to fully unionizing, a multi-year effort expected to conclude in March with the election of union officers.

UNH Graduate Employees United – UAW, representing approximately 700 graduate student workers, announced Monday it filed with the New Hampshire Public Employee Labor Relations Board to hold a union election. Almost 75% of graduate student workers in Durham signed union authorization cards in support of the process, the union revealed.

Upon its ratification, the graduate student union will officially be a chapter of the International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America.

“We wanted to come together and at least get ourselves a seat at the table to negotiate with the university,” said forestry PhD student Jed Siebert, who works as a research assistant after serving as a teaching assistant while earning his master’s degree in Durham. UNH vows to work with graduate student union

A spokesperson for UNH on Monday confirmed the school is working with the graduate students as they enter the home stretch of unionization efforts.

“UNH is committed to following the appropriate processes with all labor organizations on campus,” said spokesperson Tania deLuzuriaga in a statement. “We are working in good faith with our graduate students, the UAW and the Public Employee Labor Relations Board (PELRB) to ensure a fair process and will continue to abide by the rules of the PELRB.”

The school has agreed for the union to hold its election in March, though the date has not been determined.

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Wages, housing, insurance top issues for graduate students

Siebert joined other organizers in efforts to unionize when he began his master’s degree program in the fall 2021 semester. The majority of members of the union will be the school’s graduate teaching assistants and research assistants, he said.

“Graduate workers at UNH are definitely not in a unique position. As we’ve seen, over the last decade there has been a very significant surge in graduate workers forming unions across the country,” he added. “We have noticed that our compensation, benefits, etc. are not necessarily in line with the cost of living here. We have students who are not able to live within a reasonable driving distance to campus because they can’t afford it, or they’re in unsafe housing. We also don’t have dental or vision insurance. That can be a struggle for people.”
Josh Trombley, a graduate teaching assistant in the school's Department of Natural Resources and the Environment, also pointed to local housing barriers and low wages as key reasons for the unionization.

“Our labor fuels the university’s educational and research mission,” he said in a prepared statement. “Many courses rely on our teaching, and we play a key role in maintaining UNH’s standing as an R1 research institution. The cost of living is skyrocketing and the housing crisis continues to worsen, but our wages and benefits aren't keeping up – some of our members are paid as little as $22,000 per year.”

Unions forming at universities across U.S.

A September article from Inside Higher Ed reported that as of last July, there were 84 student worker bargaining units at colleges and universities across the country, up from 54 unions in 2021.

“We look forward to welcoming the UNH graduate workers into the growing UAW family as they take this important step towards winning their union,” said Brandon Mancilla, director of UAW Region 9A, which includes New England, New York City, and Puerto Rico, in a shared statement. “With this election agreement, they have the opportunity to join thousands of academic workers in the UAW who are standing up to take on their bosses, and build power to continue raising standards for teachers and researchers across the US.”

A majority vote from the university's graduate student workers in favor of a union will be needed for UNH Graduate Employees United – UAW to be certified.

By unionizing, UNH's graduate student workers would negotiate with the school's administration for higher wages, better benefits and healthcare coverage, and worker protections.

The momentum toward a graduate student worker union comes amid the university’s “budget reset” to the tune of $14 million in cuts from current operating expenses. As a result, dozens of staffers have been laid off from positions university-wide.

“There’s a lot of positive energy around this,” Siebert said of the unionization.

The UAW reports having over 400,000 active members in the United States, Canada and Mexico, in addition to more than 580,000 retired members within the three countries.

The UAW has over 600 local unions, totaling approximately 1,750 contracts with about 1,050 employers throughout the three countries.

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