UNH Graduate Student Workers to Vote in Upcoming Union Elections

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Note: The New Hampshire previously covered unionization efforts in an article written by Ian Lenahan for Foster’s Daily Democrat.

On March 27 and 28, graduate student workers from the University of New Hampshire (UNH) will participate in union elections in the Memorial Union Building (MUB) Granite State Room from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Graduate employees have organized around some key issues, such as the need for higher wages in the face of rising housing and overall living costs, and broader and better dental and health insurance coverage.

The union election will be conducted by the New Hampshire Public Employee Relations Board and will ask graduate student workers to complete a ballot to choose their representative, between the UNH Graduate Employees United – United Auto Workers (GEU – UAW), or no representative.

This vote aligns with the University of Vermont’s Graduate Workers United (GWU – UAW) elections which are being held on March 26 and 27, as higher education has seen increases in student worker bargaining units since 2020, according to Inside Higher Ed.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused concerns for everyone within higher education, and it changed how universities approached educating students. During 2020, UNH graduate workers began organizing around common concerns amidst the uncertainty of the pandemic, and in the next years, they built an organizing committee of workers from over 20 departments.

In the spring semester of 2023, graduate workers began a campaign for dental and vision coverage which led to a petition for these benefits with over 500 signatures. After the campaign’s success, UNH Graduate Employees United – UAW (GEU – UAW) was established in fall 2023.

The International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America, also called United Auto Workers as mentioned above (UAW), is one of the largest unions in North America and has partnered with multinational corporations, small manufacturers, state and local governments, colleges and universities and more. The UAW has over 600 local unions, totaling approximately 1,750 contracts with about 1,050 employers across the three countries.
“There is nobody to stand for us if we don’t do it ourselves. We need each other’s support and we need legal protection,” wrote Engin Taze, an ocean engineering PhD student, in a GEU – UAW Instagram post. “As an international student, I’ve seen that the visa situation of the international students generally makes them vulnerable against any abuse. I did not experience something like this myself, but I’ve witnessed the struggles of many international students. Hence, I believe that every international student should have a legal support system.”

Furthermore, they filed for union elections with overwhelming support as over 70% of graduate student workers voted in favor of elections. As of March 6, over 167 UNH faculty members had signed in support of the unionization efforts.

On Wednesday, March 6, Graduate Employees United organized a private town hall meeting for all graduate student workers to voice their concerns and questions about the union elections. Despite the rainy weather surrounding Kingsbury Hall, spirits were high at the meeting as giddy attendees enjoyed coffee and donuts while watching a presentation led by union organizers.

Jed Siebert, a forestry Ph.D. student who led the town hall meeting, urged attendees to participate because higher voter turnout leads to faster and stronger bargaining for unions in higher education. The GEU – UAW Instagram page cited the case of Worcester Polytechnic Institute’s union’s high voter turnout and bargaining success.

“We’re going to fight for what’s important to everyone,” said Siebert at the town hall meeting.

During the presentation, they cited a Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) resource called the “Living Wage Calculator” by Amy K. Glasmeier in comparison to UNH graduate worker’s stipend data. They highlighted the differences in rising costs of living for Strafford County and increases in yearly stipends for workers.

UNH GEU-UAW provided The New Hampshire with the data sets used in the town hall presentation that match the publicly available stipend data from the University of New Hampshire.
A similar graph was shown in the town hall meeting presented by UNH GEU-UAW.

A recent article published in December 2023 by the People's Policy Project stated that when graduate workers unionize, they see increased wages as demonstrated by other UAW higher education unions in the University of California system, and schools in New England such as the University of Connecticut.

The organizers also discussed the potential for improved advisor-advisee relations, and enhanced recruitment, retention and morale if the union is ratified and officially joins a chapter of the UAW.

Representatives from UNH, the New Hampshire Labor Board and UAW will be there to observe the election proceedings. Voters must bring their student ID to participate and there will be no tolerance for campaigners urging voters to vote either way, and this includes wearing union merchandise when voting or discouraging voters from voting in favor of unionizing.

GEU – UAW is also organizing voting parties departing from 19 different UNH halls to attend the elections.

In a letter sent out to faculty on February 14th, provost and vice president for academic affairs, Wayne E. Jones, and dean of the graduate school, Cari Moorhead, stated that supervisors and employees have the right to discuss concerns surrounding union organizing as long as it does not interfere with their job performance.

“We encourage our Grad Assistants to be actively engaged in making their own decision and encourage others to be engaged in the process provided it is consistent with our obligations,” stated Jones and Moorhead. “The employer may not restrain, coerce or otherwise interfere with its employees in the exercise of their rights including the right to participate in an election if they are eligible.”
The union elections are at the tail end of a tumultuous year for the UNH administration. UNH will have a new president for the 2023-24 academic year and the recent budget cuts led to layoffs and programs across the university being shut down, but union organizers stressed that their plans continue to stay the same for the election and its aftermath.

“Every worker deserves a union. I want a union so we can have some say in our workplace. Everyone deserves to be treated with dignity at work, and having a union ensures we have a seat at the table when it comes to negotiating our working conditions,” said Siebert in a union Instagram post.