



GSOC-UAW LOCAL 2110

MAKING A BETTER NYU SINCE 1998

The Union for Graduate Employees at New York University

We at GSOC-UAW Local 2110 condemn the NLRB's recent proposed rule declaring that student workers at private universities are not workers. This move marks the latest and most egregious installment in a series of efforts undertaken by conservative public officials and allegedly progressive university administrators alike to deny basic collective bargaining rights to student workers. In the interest of protecting university profits and bloated administrative payrolls, they advance a claim that all student workers know is patently false: that we do not have a primarily economic relation to the university.

After the NLRB ruled in the 2000 *NYU* decision that graduate workers are employees and have the right to unionize, this decision was overturned by the 2004 Bush-era *Brown* decision. This prompted NYU to withdraw recognition from our union, resulting in a months-long strike and another half-decade of organizing. Our collective action and pressure forced NYU to come to the bargaining table despite the *Brown* decision still being in effect. Most recently, we celebrated with our comrades across the country when, amid a surge of organizing at private universities, the NLRB ruled in the 2016 *Columbia* decision that both graduate and undergraduate workers are, indeed, workers. Over 20,000 student workers have voted to unionize since 2016 and ten private universities have agreed on contracts or are engaged in negotiations.

But here we are, again, with an anti-labor NLRB which, undoubtedly spurred by continuing anti-union animus from private universities, is declaring that we are not workers. In doing so, they have employed a tactic—using rulemaking to overturn an established ruling—that [a former chairman of the NLRB has said is “unprecedented”](#). **This move clearly demonstrates a desperate attempt to quash what we know is an ultimately unstoppable wave of growing student worker power.**

As any graduate worker knows, our labor is indispensable to the operations of the university. At NYU, more than 2,500 graduate students work for the university each semester. We instruct students. We grade. We produce research, secure grants, and generate prestige for the institution. We work in hourly positions in administrative offices, libraries, and bookstores.

And universities are keenly aware of the value that we generate for them. Over a decade of union-busting at NYU, including the dirty tactics the university resorted to in order to break our strike in 2005-2006, is a testament to this awareness. So too are the union-busting activities of Columbia, Harvard, Yale, the University of Chicago, and a host of other private universities that have gone to great measures to stifle the struggles of workers trying to better their material conditions and achieve some level of democratic control over their workplace.

Administrators know that universities can't run without our labor. Indeed, they know that the business model of the corporate university increasingly depends on the exploitation of underpaid graduate workers and adjuncts—alongside the exploitation of workers across sectors, including clerical workers, dining hall workers, and maintenance and custodial staff. And universities rely on even more severely underpaying undergraduate workers as a tactic to undercut organized labor. **It is both highly two-faced and entirely unsurprising that the more universities rely on precarious academic labor, the more dogged they are in their attempt to deny that our labor is labor.**

And let us, once more, address the tired argument that affording graduate workers collective bargaining rights poses a threat to academic freedom. Academic freedom concerns students' and scholars' freedom of inquiry (which, incidentally, universities fail time and time again to protect when it comes to the academic freedom of leftist academics and academics of color, along with, as we've seen at NYU, [academics barred from moving across NYU's "global network university" out of discriminatory and political motivations](#)). Academic freedom is *not* about protecting universities' decisions to crowd classrooms, creating poor learning conditions for our students and unsustainable working conditions for us. It's not about protecting universities' ability to underpay us or fail to recognize our contributions to research. It's not about protecting [abusive advisers](#).

This brings us to a related and equally unconvincing purported concern: that unionization creates unnecessarily adversarial relations between graduate students and their advisers. As we enter the fifth year of our current contract with NYU, we can safely report that, on the whole, having a union has not contributed to a constant climate of conflict between graduate students and faculty. Our union *has* helped graduate students fight back against late pay, wage theft, unsafe working conditions, denied vacation pay or parental leave, and heavy, undercompensated workloads. And it does serve the purpose of helping graduate students stand up to abuse and harassment at the hands of faculty members. Anyone who thinks that student workers are not entitled to these basic protections cannot pretend to have any interest in the wellbeing of students, teachers, or education.

GSOC is in the special position of having been voluntarily recognized by NYU in 2013, and based on the terms of our neutrality agreement with the university, we have every reason to believe that NYU will respect our collective bargaining rights. Furthermore, we hope NYU realizes that our collective power is too strong for any such attempt to be worth it to them.

But regardless of the status of our own unit, we stand against this dismissal of the value of our labor, and in solidarity with our comrades at other private universities who continue to organize a union, fight for recognition, or negotiate a contract. And, while this decision does not affect GSOC directly, we are also aware that each individual union is affected by the level of unionization in its sector.

The constant back-and-forth of the NLRB only shows the hollowness of arguments from the top, attempting to settle a matter that in reality will be decided only by the collective strength and organization of workers. We will continue to organize within NYU and with student workers everywhere to assert our rights and fight for our livelihoods. And at the end of the day, student workers across the country have the power to bring universities to a halt and make them acutely aware of their material dependence on our labor.

Any member of the public who wishes to stand with us may [submit a comment](#) to the Board opposing the proposed rule. The Board must take into account and respond to all substantive comments, so grad workers across the country will be attempting to flood the comment section up until the Nov. 22 deadline. Join us!

NYU grad students should be on the lookout for GSOC trainings and actions around this in the near future. If you have any concerns or want to get involved in organizing, get in touch with any of your stewards or email gsoc@2110uaw.org. Also join us for our General Membership Meeting on October 8, 2019 at 4:30 pm in Eisner & Lubin Auditorium, Kimmel Center (4th floor), 60 Washington Square. In the meantime, make sure you have signed a [union card](#)! It matters more than ever!