

GEO and 'U' reach first tentative agreement

Union and University bargaining teams returned to the table last week after the winter break and held productive talks on employee rights, union rights, and information gathering. The two sides also agreed to set up Work Groups to discuss job posting, childcare, and disability proposals.

A negotiation landmark was reached during bargaining on January 5, as GEO and the University reached their first tentative agreement on Article 7, Information. This article specifies the types of information about current GSIs that the University is obligated to provide to the Union. As part of this tentative agreement, GEO got the University to re-instate citizenship status as an element of mandatory reports and agreed to take requests for GSIs' Uniq Names and disability accommodations out of the article. GEO, however, reserves the right to propose language requesting information about work accommodations in the Disability Access article. Copies of the agreed-upon contract language were initialed by members of both teams. Article 7 is now in place for ratification at the end of negotiations.

Bargaining on January 5 also included a lengthy and productive discussions on Employee Rights. The union answered questions regarding proposals to facilitate GSI requests for classrooms with multimedia and other technologies that would be beneficial to teaching and ensure that GSIs have access to resources for printing materials necessary for teaching.

At the January 7 session, the GEO passed along a counterproposal on Union Rights. The two sides moved closer to an agreement but are still discussing the processes whereby the union is notified of employee orientations. The University also proposed devoting upcoming bargaining sessions to Work Groups on several contract areas. GEO's bargaining team expressed that they are open to this, with specific dates and topics to be determined.

Much of the second half of the session was devoted to the first of these Work Groups. Members of the bargaining team met with members of the University team to begin discussing job postings. While this group met, Union staff and other members of the bargaining team held a member caucus to explain the function of Work Groups and discuss their strategic value. Both sides came back together to end the session with a short presentation by Chemistry Steward Heidi Pedini on the late-night grading experiences of GSIs in the department.

Overall, talks continued cordially with an emphasis on communication. GEO looks forward to receiving more counterproposals and having more opportunities to present members' experiences.

From the grassroots: Chemistry Steward Heidi Pedini

At the January 7 bargaining session, Heidi Pedini brought the on-the-ground experiences of the Chemistry GSIs she represents as a union steward to the table.

In a brief but powerful statement, Pedini related the hard facts of what Chemistry GSIs do to make sure exams are graded fairly. In large introductory courses, GSIs work together to grade, initial, total scores, initial, re-total scores, initial, transcribe score twice, initial each student's exam twice, and finally rank by section 1500 exams.

Of course, it is not these exacting steps that concern GSIs—following these steps is part of doing a good job. The long and late hours in which they must be performed, however, can threaten the ability of GSIs to do their jobs well and safely. For certain chemistry courses, GSIs are currently required to do all of this in one marathon session, usually continuing past midnight and sometimes until 2 or 4am. As Pedini put it, these are late night sessions that turn into early morning sessions. This creates problems getting home after buses have stopped running and potential problems leading early morning labs the next day, in which GSIs may well be responsible for the safety of undergraduates handling hazardous material. Splitting this process across two evenings or starting at an earlier time of day would alleviate this burden.

Pedini's first-hand account of chemistry GSIs' work helped the University's bargaining team understand the real needs that drive GEO's proposal for amending Article 21 (Employee Rights) to include a provision addressing the scheduling of mandatory work hours.

Pedini emphasized that she was driven to present a first-hand account of this process because it is an issue that is important to GEO members across her department. On an individual level, chemistry GSIs, like all GSIs, keep their day-to-day focus on doing a great job for the students in their classes. No one is trying to complain or get out of doing work. As a group, though, they are making their voice heard in order to address concerns they have about how certain situations impede their ability to be effective teachers, graders, and lab supervisors—and "early morning" grading sessions are one of these concerns.

We want feedback!

Tell us what you think about bargaining:
<http://umgeo.org/webcaucus>

What is a Work Group & why do we have them?

This week, GEO and the University agreed to include Work Groups in upcoming bargaining sessions.

A Work Group is a small group of University and GEO negotiators and up to three invited consultants for each side. A consultant can be anyone who is not formally a member of the bargaining team but who has a contribution to make to the discussion of the issue at hand. If discussing Parents Rights, for example, the University might invite a University childcare provider and the Union might invite a member of the Parents' Caucus. This small group meets together to discuss a particular issue related to bargaining in a less formal setting.

Work Groups are different from formal bargaining in a couple of important ways. Unlike all other bargaining sessions, they are not open to the general membership. As one member present during the caucus on January 7 quite rightly pointed out, this seems to conflict with the democratic ethos of a union. The reason that GEO has agreed to include these types of sessions in bargaining is that they have proven useful to establishing better communication. Both sides can work out a shared vocabulary for talking about issues and speak more openly about their rationale for proposals. Work Groups are not a venue for making gains or concessions. All proposals must be made in full, formal sessions.

Along with the limited audience, these sessions have a limited formal record. Note-taking may or may not take place, depending on what the people involved agree upon.

These meetings are not, however, confidential. The ground covered during Work Group discussions is shared with both the bargaining team and the membership at a slightly later point, but it is not secret. Individual members can also be called upon to participate as consultants, offering them a chance to share personal testimony in a more confidential setting if they so desire (while leaving open the possibility of sharing other testimonies in regular sessions).

On days when Work Groups take place, members are still encouraged to attend. Member caucuses can be held during Work Groups, allowing the team to report back on conversations held, and there will likely be some formal bargaining during all sessions.

The goal of the Work Group is for us to learn as much as we can about where the University is coming from and vice versa. They have proven helpful in areas that are either highly technical (such as Union Rights) or relatively new to the contract (such as Disability Access and Parents' Rights). The purpose is to help communication progress, not to haggle out proposals or make deals. Proposals and agreements will always happen in full bargaining sessions. Work Groups are not a substitute for formal bargaining; they are an additional tool.

Meet your bargaining team

Renee Echols, Lead Negotiator

One of the most important lessons we learned over the first month of bargaining is how every contribution enriches the bargaining process. The bargaining team, for instance, consists of members who bring different experiences and strengths to the discussion with the administration:

Lauren Squires, who has served twice as GEO grievance chair, and **Jonathan McLaughlin** who has worked on last year's grievance committee and serves as this year's grievance chair, both offer to the bargaining process a detailed knowledge of crucial aspects of the GEO contract, which they have gleaned as a result of working closely with members and the administration when there are concerns about how GSIs and GSSAs are being treated on the job.

Patrick O'Mahen, who volunteered as communications chair during the last round of negotiations in 2007-8, draws upon his considerable skills in research and empirical analysis as a political scientist to develop clear, cogent arguments about complex issues of import to both our members and the university, including salary and benefits.

Katie Brion, a GSI this year and mother of two small children, brings to the conversation a keen understanding of the often intricate topics of child care subsidies, campus child care centers, and parental and medical leave, while attentively representing the concerns of graduate employee parents and contributing clarification and perspective for the team at critical moments.

As lead negotiator, I work to facilitate the discussion at the bargaining table, providing the opportunity for progress on the issues of our bargaining platform through constructive negotiations with the administration. This facilitation entails enabling each unique voice of the bargaining team to contribute to the conversation while creating a focused collective voice which conveys the breadth of our goals of access and equality for all our members.

Mark your calendar!

Jan. 12: Topics TBD, Work Groups (Palmer Commons, Plaza Room, 3rd Floor)

Interested members can be invited to attend Work Groups as consultants. Please contact **Mathieu Desan** (bargainingchair@geo3550.org) if interested.

Jan 14: Topics TBD (Palmer Commons, Plaza Room, 3rd Floor)

*Closed captioning TBD. Bargaining runs from 1-5pm, but come at any time to make our union's presence known.

Getting involved is getting easier!

- We want feedback! Tell us what you think about bargaining @ <http://umgeo.org/webcaucus>
- Come to bargaining! (see calendar above for times and locations)
- Friend us on Facebook: Michigan GEO
- Follow us on Twitter: geo3550
- Check out the website: www.umgeo.org - includes RSS updates