



# Graduate Student Worker

Fall 2011

Newsletter of the University of Michigan  
GRADUATE EMPLOYEES' ORGANIZATION  
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<http://umgeo.org>

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Did you notice our new logo? Thanks goes out to designer Annie Krambuhl for our new look!

## GEO OFFICERS & STAFF

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Psychology & Women's Studies

### VICE PRESIDENT

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History

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Materials Science & Engineering

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Will Hutchison  
English & Education

### STAFF

Amber Cooper & Jim McAsey

## The State of Our Union:

### A Letter from the President

My name is Sam Montgomery and I am a Ph.D candidate in Psychology and Women's Studies. After serving as a steward for both of my departments, and then as chair of the Organizing Committee during last year's contract campaign, I am honored to serve as the current President of the Graduate Employees' Organization. Our democratic and member-run Union is at an exciting moment in its history.

Now, it is important for us to see these things through: we need to ensure the creation and management of the centralized fund and office for Employees with disabilities, and we need to put pressure on the University to accept the recommendations of our childcare committee.

Our members need to learn about all of the gains in our new contract and continue to participate in our process of democratic decision-making. Over the next year, we will be actively reaching out to our members through regular department meetings, general membership meetings, and social events. We will keep building our strength as a Union, organizing more active members and stewards from across all campuses. We will also improve our internal communications with regular updates, newsletters, and a well-functioning website. Grievances will be handled in a timely fashion and

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During the 2010-2011 contract campaign, our members came together and demanded a fair and just collective bargaining agreement. By calling into the administration, flooding the Regents meeting, staging a grade-in and marching from the Diag to the Fleming Building, we were able to demonstrate our power as a Union and won the first contract in over 20 years without a strike or walk-out. We also secured historic contract language for Grad Employees with disabilities, and advanced the gains for Grad Employee parents. (For more information, see [umgeo.org](http://umgeo.org).)

## GSRAs for GEO: A Letter from the GSRA Chair

My historic apathy towards unions changed when I came to U of M. In speaking with GEO members and considering my own experiences as a GSRA here, I realized that forming a GSRA union just makes sense.

Since the University typically offers the same package negotiated for GSIs to GSRAs, why do GSRAs need a union? Because we, GSRAs, are employees, and we should have a voice and a method for talking to our employer, the University. Not having an official means of doing so muzzles each and every one of us--whether we have the best student-adviser relationship in the world, or an average one, or a strained one.

Fundamentally, GEO is graduate students helping other graduate students. With a united voice, GEO has managed to secure good wages, health insurance, and other benefits for GSIs and GSSAs, and has prevented the University from reducing or removing these benefits in a political climate that has been hostile towards public employees.

I've talked to quite a few GSRAs who say that everything is fine for them

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*Letter from the President continued from page 1*

we will spearhead department campaigns when the contract itself is not enough.

We are also committed to combating the frightening pieces of legislation currently coming out of Lansing. Indeed, we need to build the momentum that we have gained this past year as we face an increasingly hostile climate for students and workers at the state and national levels. Our union has played a large part in forming the Washtenaw Community Action Team, reaching out to other unions, students, and community members in efforts to fight back. We must make sure that GEO stands at the forefront of not just the grad labor movement, but the labor movement itself.

We are at the dawn of a new era for GEO. Since the Winter of 2010, we have been working with GSRAs to restore their collective bargaining rights. It is incredible to think that we are so close to an election! Nevertheless, there is still a long road ahead. In order to win the election, we have to keep talking with our fellow Grad Employees and encourage full participation from GSRAs. If and when GSRAs vote to form a union, we will need to elect a new bargaining team led by GSRAs and win another strong and fair contract. Together, GSIs, GSSAs, and GSRAs will continue to build upon our strong history as a Union and we can continue to collaborate with the University in establishing mutually beneficial employment practices for ALL grad employees.

This is our time.  
In Solidarity,  
Sam Montgomery, President  
Graduate Employees' Organization  
AFT Local 3550, AFL-CIO

## ***Solidarity in Action***

### **Our Power is Solidarity: Working with GSRAs to get the right to vote**

Our ongoing campaign to restore collective bargaining rights to GSRAs demonstrates how much graduate employees can accomplish when we work together. With the combined effort of all categories of grad employees and staff organizers, we have been able to speak with nearly 1800 research assistants about the campaign and the work that RAs do for the University. Grad employees have put countless hours into these conversations, negotiating the terms of a GSRA unionization election with the University, and performing numerous other tasks to lead us to where we stand now: on the cusp of an historic election.

Despite administrative hurdles, we are able to continue moving toward an election thanks to the incredible solidarity that has developed between our members. Now is the time to step up our efforts and make sure that GSRAs are able to exercise their right

*Letter from the GSRA Chair continued from page 1*

and a union isn't necessary. But even those of us for whom things are great know others who are in more difficult situations than we are - someone who has a baby or a dying parent they must care for, who is forced to work in unsafe conditions or who is negotiating the political and logistical minefield involved with switching advisers (something I've done myself).

Currently there is no advocate for GSRAs in these situations related to our employment. With a collective voice, GSRAs can bargain about issues specific to us: information from the university regarding available positions and funding, equal treatment for GSRAs regardless of nationality (particularly regarding vacation and work schedules), and whistleblower protections for unsafe lab conditions.

It's really not hard to get involved. Send an email! They get read. You don't have to go to meetings or even leave the lab. And come meet those of us working to form a union for GSRAs. I, for one, would love to get to speak with you.

Andrea Jokisaari  
GSRA Steering Committee Chair  
PhD student, Materials Science and Engineering

to vote in a fair and democratic election, and to begin laying the foundation for bargaining a GSRA contract should research assistants choose to represent themselves through a union. More than anything, this is going to require continuing conversations to keep members informed and to get as much input from RAs as possible on what issues are important and what we need in a GSRA contract to keep doing great research here at the University of Michigan. Whether we are GSRAs, GSIs, or GSSAs, we are all GEO, and together we make change happen.

### **GEO & LEO members work with Washtenaw Community Action Team**

The Solidarity & Political Action Committee has been hard at work in coalitional efforts to repeal Public Act 4, which allows Emergency Financial Managers to be appointed by the governor, with power to dissolve democratically elected city governments. GEO members like Serge Farinas (pictured right at a Lansing rally), have volunteered their time to collect signatures to begin the process of repealing this troubling legislation.

Photo by  
Ben Seese





## Protecting Your Rights

### *It's time to enforce our new contract*

This past year, GSIs and GSSAs, working together in GEO, collectively negotiated with the University a labor contract that covers our compensation and working conditions for the next three years. Making sure that departments follow the contract is every member's responsibility. Grievances are formal complaints about contract violations. The grievance procedure involves a number of conversations, beginning with a conversation between you and your direct supervisor. Here's a quick look at some of most common grievances. Contact your departmental steward or the Grievance Chair at [grrrchair@geo3550.org](mailto:grrrchair@geo3550.org) for more info. Help enforce your rights!

#### *HOURS*

If your appointment says that you should be working a certain number of hours a week and you're exceeding that amount, you may be entitled to a reduction of duties or increase in pay.

#### *JOB SECURITY*

A department cannot rescind an employment offer, even if enrollment is lower than expected or the offer was stated to be "unofficial". You cannot be fired from your job unless you resign or the department goes through the proper procedure.

#### *CLASSIFICATION*

If you are hired as a grader for a whole term and use subjective judgment when grading, even with an answer key, you may be a GSI. If you've been hired as a Graduate Student Mentor to assist new instructors above your regular GSI duties, you should have a separate fraction. If you are doing administrative work relevant to your studies, such as working in a department library or as a program assistant, you may be a GSSA.

#### *ACCOMMODATIONS*

Employees with disabilities have the right to ask for accommodations to help complete their duties.

#### *RESOURCES*

You have access to departmental photocopiers and printers for work purposes.

#### *PAID LEAVE*

If you miss work because of a medical condition or illness, parental leave, a death in the family, jury duty, or an immigration hearing, it is University's responsibility to find a replacement for you and compensate them.

#### *TEMPORARY REPLACEMENT PAY*

If you substitute for someone who is on leave for any of the above reasons, you are entitled to pay.

**For more info, check out:**

**[contract.umgeo.org](http://contract.umgeo.org)**

**& [www.umgeo.org/member-resources/](http://www.umgeo.org/member-resources/)**

## GET INVOLVED IN YOUR UNION

### Join a committee!

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#### **ORGANIZING**

Works to increase the level of involvement and activism in GEO; works to organize members and coordinate campaigns

[OCchair@geo3550.org](mailto:OCchair@geo3550.org)

#### **GRIEVANCE**

Helps enforce the GEO contract by stewarding employees through the grievance procedure and providing contract education

[GRRRchair@geo3550.org](mailto:GRRRchair@geo3550.org)

#### **SOLIDARITY & POLITICAL ACTION**

Educates and advocates around political issues affecting GEO's membership; forges solidarity with other unions

[SPAC.Chair@geo3550.org](mailto:SPAC.Chair@geo3550.org)

#### **COMMUNICATIONS**

Keep GEO members & the community informed through newsletters, the GEO planner, the GEO website, and other media

[CommChair@geo3550.org](mailto:CommChair@geo3550.org)

### Take on an issue!

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#### **PARENTS' CAUCUS**

Working to hold the University accountable on its promise to participate in a committee to address access to the childcare subsidy and implement its recommendations.

[parentscaucus@geo3550.org](mailto:parentscaucus@geo3550.org)

#### **WASHTENAW COMMUNITY ACTION TEAM**

Coalition of community members working against state legislation that threatens a decent standard of life for Michigan workers and families.

[info@washtenawcat.org](mailto:info@washtenawcat.org)

### Get stuff done!

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#### **ACTIVISM FACTORY**

Meets **every other Wednesday** (alternating with Stewards Council meetings) at **6 PM** in the GEO office to perform needed tangible tasks while enjoying food and drink.

<http://umgeo.org/events>



# Why is September so groovy?

It's got so many ways to get your **GEO** on:

## Wednesday, September 7: GEO Open House

Where: Central Campus GEO Office (330 E. Liberty, Suite 3F)

When: 5-8pm

- Come grab a Faygo or a beer and catch up with your GEO pals!

## Tuesday, September 20: Central Campus GMM

Where: Rackham Auditorium (4th floor of the Rackham Building)

When: 6-7pm

## Wednesday, September 21: North Campus GMM

Where: Pierpont Commons

When: 6-7pm

- At these General Membership Meetings we'll update members on all of this past summer's developments, including updates on the GSRA campaign and the status of anti-worker legislation that would, if implemented, impact our working lives.
- We'll also give a run-down of what's new in our contract and what areas you should be paying attention to in order to make sure the contract we bargained for gets enforced.

## Friday, September 23: GEO 2011-12 Kickoff Party

Where: To be determined--will be announced at GMM or ask your steward for details!

When: 7pm until?

- In which our only agenda is dancing the night away.

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## Upcoming Action Alert

**When: September 22, 10am-2pm**

**Where: Office of Financial Aid**

**What:** The Parents' Caucus is holding a childcare subsidy "apply-in" at the OFA. Parents will gather to fill out FAFSAs in the and send the message that all parents deserve childcare.

## Follow GEO online!

- **Twitter:** geo3550
- **Facebook:** Michigan GEO
- **For GEO's updated events calendar,** bookmark: <http://umgeo.org/events> (you can also subscribe to the calendar on Google Calendar)