

# Protests as Trump labor board moves to restrict grad student unions

Michael Walters  
19 November 2019

Graduate students protested last week outside the offices of the United States National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) in Chicago, Boston and Washington, DC in reaction to a proposed rule curbing the establishment of graduate student unions at private universities.

The proposal would classify the students as primarily having an educational rather than an economic relationship with their university employers. As they would no longer be classified as employees, grad students would not fall under the NLRB's jurisdiction or receive the meager protections it provides. This rule change would give private universities significant leverage against students seeking to form unions or collectively bargain.

The protests, billed as a "National Day of Action in Defense of Grad Rights," were called by the AFT, UAW and Service Employees International Union (SEIU). According to the Facebook event page, 20,000 workers have joined private graduate unions since 2016. Despite hundreds of thousands of members in these parent unions and thousands of graduate students affected by the rule, the protests only attracted about 100 students and union bureaucrats.

This proposal is an attack on the democratic rights of students to organize. Graduate students certainly need organizations to fight the well-financed private universities. However, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the United Auto Workers (UAW) and other unions have politically subordinated grad students to the Democratic Party and the austerity measures demanded by the corporate and financial elite.

The small turnout signifies the lack of any real confidence in the unions, which are using back-room maneuvers to gain recognition from university administrations and big business politicians. The only interest the AFT, the UAW and other unions have in "organizing" university workers is to bolster their dues income and shrinking membership after decades of colluding in the destruction of millions of jobs.

Speaking at the grad student protest in Chicago was the president of the Chicago Teachers Union, Jesse Sharkey, who recently shut down and betrayed the 11-day strike by 25,000 teachers and support staff. The contract signed by the CTU did nothing to address teachers' demands for more staff and smaller class sizes and will pave the way for a new round of school closings by the Democratic administration of Mayor

Lori Lightfoot.

Sharkey, a leading member of the now defunct International Socialist Organization, adapted his usual rhetoric to appeal to a younger crowd by appealing to anti-capitalist sentiments and the widespread disgust for President Trump. At the same time, Sharkey promoted the myth that Trump's NLRB could be counted on to defend the rights of workers, if only they pressured the government agency enough.

Grad students are highly exploited workers. They perform vital work for universities, serving as graduate and teaching assistants for professors in undergraduate courses and overseeing classes of their own. All the while, they perform research and other critical duties that draw in grants and other lucrative resources to private universities, even as they study to complete their PhD and Master's programs.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the mean income of graduate teaching assistants is \$36,390. This stipend, which is a fraction of tenured faculty's compensation, is often eaten up by taxes, health insurance and graduate fees, forcing students to take out additional loans. While the students live in poverty, the universities make hundreds of millions of dollars from the stock market and real estate ventures, paying their top administrators enormous salaries.

Three times over the last 30 years, the National Labor Relations Board has issued decisions changing graduate students' status at private universities. The Notice of Proposed Rulemaking issued by Trump's NLRB would create a new rule, rather than simply reverse a previous decision.

The most recent decision was an August 2016 ruling against Columbia University. After years of litigation, the ruling was issued less than three months before the contentious 2016 presidential election. The move was largely a last-minute electoral maneuver to win support for the Democratic Party.

Following the 2016 decision, unions at dozens of private schools held unionization votes and petitioned the NLRB for recognition. With the election of Donald Trump, the Board, appointed by him, began rejecting applications. This led unions at Yale University, Boston College, the University of Chicago and other universities to withdraw petitions for NLRB recognition, claiming an unfavorable NLRB ruling might have broader implications outside the school. As a result, the

organizations shifted their tactics to begging school administrations for voluntary recognition.

At no point did the unions seek to mobilize university workers, students, public school teachers and broader sections of the working class to oppose the Trump administration. Inextricably tied to the Democratic Party, the unions oppose any genuine mobilization of workers because it could quickly attract broader sections of workers and turn into a conflict not just with the Trump administration, but with the Democrats, who defend the corporate and financial elite just as savagely as the Republicans.

The policy reversals for grad students reflect tactical differences within the ruling class over the best means of policing the working class. One faction, aligned primarily with the Democratic Party, is in favor of propping up the corrupt labor bureaucracy, seeing the unions as the most efficient mechanism for suppressing the class struggle and imposing the dictates of the ruling class while providing a reliable source of campaign contributions.

Another faction, aligned primarily with the Republican Party, is largely in favor of removing whatever government sanctions for the unions still remain, viewing the unions as costly and unnecessary middlemen and seeking to financially cripple these large donors to the Democratic Party. These differences were at the center of the US Supreme Court's 2018 *Janus v. AFSCME* case, which ended the requirement that workers who opt out of unions must pay agency fees. During the case, one union attorney argued that any weakening of the unions could result in "a wave of labor unrest."

In November 2018, more than two years after the Columbia decision, the Columbia University graduate and post-doctoral students entered into a "framework agreement" with the administration. This "agreement" did not give them a contract, merely recognized the Graduate Workers of Columbia-UAW and the Columbia Post-Doctoral Workers-UAW as the "exclusive bargainers" for students. In exchange, the university received a 14-month no strike clause.

Since Trump's election, the unions have used the time to wear down students' expectations. Graduate students at the University of Chicago staged a three-day "labor action" demanding the administration recognize their union. Nothing was achieved and students were ordered back to work by the union. In response to the NLRB proposal, the University announced plans to structure teaching by PhD students as "mentored teaching experiences" and end teaching as a prerequisite for funding.

As shown by Columbia University, the unions are more than willing to accept significant concessions in exchange for "recognition." The record is no different at public universities where state law makes union organization easier. The grad student unions have operated entirely within the budgetary framework imposed by the two corporate-controlled parties and the big banks and bondholders that they defend.

Last March, 1,600 University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) graduate students walked out to fight poverty wages and demand an end to student fees. The three-week strike was called off by the Graduate Employees Organization (GEO) Local 6297, an affiliate of the Illinois Federation of Teachers, which signed a deal that kept salaries at the poverty rate of \$18,140 a year.

The NLRB's Notice of Proposed Rulemaking began 60 days of public comments during which graduate unions have encouraged students to write letters to the board. In an interview with the *Daily Northwestern*, Kitty Yang, co-chair of Northwestern Graduate Workers, said, "What we're trying to take advantage of is NLRB as a federal agency has to at least read and respond to significant comments, so what we're trying to do is at least slow down the process, and hope that there's a new NLRB."

The promotion of the Democratic Party, however, is a dead end for grad students. The Obama administration oversaw the greatest transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top in US history and conducted a frontal assault on teachers and public education. If the Democrats take office in January 2021 and stack the NLRB with their appointees, the class war against teachers will continue to escalate.

The promotion of the unions is the stock-in-trade of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and other pseudo-left organizations whose leading members have increasingly gotten lucrative positions within the trade union apparatus.

Grad students need organizations to fight for their social and democratic rights. But these must be democratically controlled by rank-and-file workers and completely independent of the pro-capitalist and nationalist unions. The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) calls on grad student to form rank-and-file workplace and factory committees to mobilize the broadest sections of the working class in the US and internationally against austerity, social inequality and the drive to war and dictatorship.

The fight for the most elemental social rights of the working class poses the necessity for a political counteroffensive by the working class aimed at expropriating the fortunes of the super-rich, radically redistributing wealth and reorganizing economic life along socialist lines. The IYSSE calls on grad students to contact us to take up this fight today.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**