

Union Summer Ends and Labor's New Season Begins

My second day at UIUC, I took an eight-hour road trip to Madison, Wisconsin for a Coalition of Graduate Employee Union conference (CGEU). Over 30 universities were represented including Yale, Michigan State, and Washington State. New to the work, I was excited to witness the negotiation of a first contract as well as the planning and preparation for a first union election. With the guidance of my supervisor Nicole Holtzclaw, it did not take long to jump into my work. Nicole gave me clear instructions about how to perform my tasks. My first impressions when I started with the G.E.O. were that of an outsider in the Midwest. After my first day, I knew I was going to like it and the four weeks would fly by.

I prepared a report for the bargaining team to help identify other graduate employee unions at other universities. UIUC is a new union in the sense they have only had one contract. By comparing the UIUC's with mature contracts, I found that when a union gets its first contract, they tend to not have very strong language. The first contract is the union's foot in the door, while the administration is still grieving and does not want to let go of the power. By looking at mature contracts, I could analyze how strong they are. It is especially obvious when the subject comes to healthcare. Organizations' progress and implement those advantages into the next UIUC contract. My assignment goal was to compare these five senior contracts to UIUC's and change and use stronger wording such as "shall" rather than "may" in parts of the contract. I prepared a report for the bargaining team. During this organizing campaign we visited employees at their home to discuss their concerns. This was a new and tiring experience. The days were long: lots of walking in and out of neighborhoods and driving in your car, only to find that many graduate employees not being home when you got there. When Nicole and I did reach someone they were usually polite and willing to take time to fill out the survey. It was a pilot survey and after reasonable suggestions, Nicole shortened it to fewer than 30 questions for the fall semester employees to complete. I did not like house visiting because I felt it was too much time and effort walking door to door, hoping members will be home and willing to fill out the survey. But the survey was a valuable means for G.E.O. members to voice how important issues in the contract were and what they would like to see changed. Writing contract language for the bargaining team was, I found, most exciting because I was taking part in providing boundaries of what the administration could and could not do.

During my research, we discovered that Michigan State covered 95% of an employee's healthcare cost from a preferred insurance provider and 85% of the cost from a non-preferred insurance provider. In a disappointing comparison, UIUC covered no healthcare in the first year and \$50 per semester in the second year.

I did have my criticisms of the program. One was that, at the end of the internship, there was no formal job fair nor a list of opportunities to pursue. Others complained of housing conditions being dirty and too small, though they were soon relocated. Some of the host unions did not have a good plan and some interns felt like they were not able to utilize their time. Also some unions had an active campaign going on and did not take advantage of the ability to have Union Summer interns to help.

But my experience was educational and sparked my inter-13.68 Td (c)bio y advant160(i)-Td (t)(y)30(1i)-2(s)-1()-2

Because of my work with Union Summer, I decided to pursue a career in the labor movement by working as a union organizer. The role of an organizer is to mobilize people to act on their own behalf. I decided to become an organizer because I have wanted to help gather, educate, and empower working people to live better lives and to instill hope. Also, because of my internship I was able to have a foundation and solid ground to enter the labor field. Because of the internship I was able to get my feet wet and get first-hand experience of what unions are about. Last fall, I went to work on the international staff of the Service Employees' International Union (SEIU).

There are two parts of SEIU: local staff and international staff. Local staff stay in one area and specifically work with that campaign. Being on international means that you travel all over the country to work on various campaigns. SEIU International staff has offered me the opportunity to work on various campaigns. Already I have worked in Washington State for a childcare campaign, Ohio for a political campaign, and Houston for a city employees campaign. My current job focus is in Miami for the Florida Healthcare Union (FHU). What many Floridians do not know is that the individual hospitals located in their community are actually owned by HCA, Hospital Corporation of America, the most profitable and largest hospital chain in the world.³ Because of the arduous agreement reached by both HCA and SEIU, we have the opportunity to organize 6 Florida hospitals in 90 days! This agreement marks a historic moment in the labor movement because no union has ever attempted to challenge the leading corporation that has made it acceptable for healthcare to be a for-profit

experience them. Caroline had read about unions being on the decline, but SEIU stuck out to her as an active union. She found out about applying for the union organizer position by the Internet on www.seiu.org. At her one-day screening for the job, she was told to be prepared for the investment of a long day and that an organizer's schedule reflects that of the workers schedule -- which means you will usually be overworked! She was also told to be prepared for a transient lifestyle, required to move from place to place at anytime. In two weeks, Caroline moved from Oakland, California to Boston to start her first campaign in childcare. The positive aspects of being a union organizer is that she would directly see change and will be making a contribution to middle-class society. In her months of experience she came to feel that her job helped her frame an honest portrayal of American workers. It connects her to a long working class history, as well as bringing a humbling responsibility to build on that legacy today. And it is the most direct way to make genuine social change.

Why, then, did Union Summer end? I had the opportunity to gain insight into this question last fall when I met Nancy Lenk, the last director of Union Summer. Nancy now serves as the National Field Director for SEIU as well as the Director of the Deputy Marketing Company for SEIU. I recently asked her why she felt that Union Summer did not survive the split. One reason she gave was that SEIU, the largest contributor to Union Summer, left the AFL-CIO last summer with several other large unions to form the new "Change to Win" federation. A