

CLASS STRUGGLE



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Board Assessment of Fall 2019

In August 2017, our organization was 10 people holding meetings in an office common room with \$200 to our name.

We now represent over 400 graduate workers and have net assets of nearly 30 times that. Our membership spans 50 departments, and our efforts have been mentioned in the Daily Camera, the Denver Post, and even the Washington Post.

Across the country graduate workers are standing together to demand better working conditions and we, the Board of Directors of the CRC, are proud to represent an organization riding this wave.

In this letter we'd like to lay out some of the CRC's Fall 2019 achievements of which we personally are most proud, as well as

a frank appraisal of our shortcomings. In Spring 2020, we hope to use these lessons to drive even bigger growth of our membership base and collective power. By standing together we can earn a fair wage and benefits, and a better CU for all.

Our largest effort this semester was the "Fee Waiver Now" rally and sit-in. From October 21st-28th we saw over a hundred graduate students occupy the Regent building to demand a full fee waiver. On any given day nearly 50 graduate students filled the lobby and demonstrated the breadth and depth of the labor which we perform for CU. Whether grading, writing papers, or working on grant applications, graduate workers produce immense value for the university, and for one week we made sure it was visible to the administration. We capped off this incredible week of action with a rally, when over 400 graduate students and supporters flooding Farrand Field and the Regents Building.

Nevertheless, we must acknowledge that our demands remain unmet. CU continues to refuse to acknowledge their legitimacy or even the existence of the CRC. For this reason, we also view these actions as ineffective. So long as our relationship with our employer relies solely on their goodwill and distaste for critical media coverage, change will come incrementally and only on the University's schedule. Going forward, we need to expand our base of power and explore new tactics.

Less visible, but no less important, was the continued development of our incredible canvassing team. Last semester, our recruiting efforts yielded significant, record-breaking growth in our union, both in raw numbers and departmental coverage. Thanks to the volunteers of the CRC, we regularly mobilized people week after week to visit graduate workers in their offices and laboratories. These 'canvassing sessions' expanded our representation across departments, and we have made a huge stride in increasing STEM membership. Canvassing is critical to

our mission: the strength of our union depends on having a membership that represents the entire university. Thank you to all who came out to canvas with us, and we look forward to growing this team in the New Year!

Besides these public actions, our supporters behind the scenes have been crucial to the success of our graduate food stipend. Thanks to the incredible generosity of our donors, what started as 3 months of support for one graduate student last Spring 2019, is now able to provide a 9-month food stipend to two graduate students. The board offers our deepest, sincerest thanks to every donor who made this possible. However, we must also mention that it is absolutely shameful that their generosity was necessary in the first place. While the Food Stipend relieves the burden of food insecurity for a few, the CRC's ultimate goal remains the welfare of the many.

We look forward to another year of solidarity and union power, and we wish all workers a strong Spring semester.

Signed,

Peter Shaffery
Janet Ruppert
Brandon Daniels
Kylene Solvik

The CRC Board



CWA Affiliation Plan

The Board of the CRC believes that our organization should choose to affiliate with the national labor union Communication Workers of America (CWA). Over the next semester, we plan to discuss with our membership what affiliation would mean for us and its impact on our union's strategy. In this brief letter, we outline some of the most significant reasons for affiliation.

Strong coalition to shape public higher education

Affiliation with CWA would expand our bargaining unit to all university workers across all CU campuses (Boulder, Denver, CO Springs, Anschutz-Medical). Since the CU system is the number one employer in Colorado, with over 40,000 workers, this would inaugurate the largest labor union in the state.

The mission of public education is lost in Colorado. The appointment of Mark Kennedy as President, outrageous hikes in tuition and fees, and six-figure Dean salaries have demonstrated that the university is more interested in turning a profit than providing high-quality, affordable public higher education.

Affiliation presents us the opportunity to push back against the corporate university by growing our union into the strongest political coalition in the state. By forming a union for all CU system workers, we will be building power to influence the Board of Regents, the Colorado General Assembly, and the direction of public higher education in Colorado.

A wall-to-wall CU union

In our effort to organize grad workers, we have encountered countless employees from all parts of the university interested in unionization. Research lab workers, lecturers, postdocs, janitorial staff, bookstore employees, and office staff members all deserve a union too.

Only a small subset of these workers, who meet specific qualifications ("classified staff"), are eligible to join the union CO-WINS. The rest, like us, have no formal representation for their working conditions to the university.

We recognize the common struggle and solidarity of all university employees -- from tenure-track faculty to undergraduate workers. While the issues we face may differ (some employees are lucky enough to have parental leave!), we are united by a common desire to have greater control over our workplace. In labor organizing, this is called a wall-to-wall strategy, and would expand our base of power tenfold!

Lasting structure

Affiliation means material support, organizing guidance, and a strong foundation from the national. With CWA, material support would include a full-time organizer, access to lawyers, and banking support. Working alongside a paid union staffer would mean access to an experienced organizer's knowledge base, rather than relying on the labor of overworked graduate students, with a membership turnover every five or so years.

Conclusion

For these reasons, the Board of the CRC views affiliating with CWA as an opportunity to expand and strengthen our union. By providing us with much-needed material resources, organizational guidance, and a lasting structure, affiliation gives us the opportunity to reshape the political terrain of Colorado.



Grievances Team

When something goes wrong in the workplace, there's power in numbers. That's what we've learned at the CRC Grievance Team, where we document workplace abuses. We seek to understand patterns of unfair labor practices at CU. And we stand in solidarity with members who are navigating problems such as late wages, wage theft, workplace harassment, immigration visa issues and arbitrary termination of contract. Since 2017, we have mediated conflict, connected fellow graduate workers with employment and tax attorneys, and filed letters to university officials in support of member grievances — and we've won real results.

Below, we have a story documenting those material gains from Allison Shelton, CRC member and PhD Candidate in English. Allison describes how the CRC had her back when the university bullied her with burdensome and unfair tax consequences due to their own administrative error.

If you have a workplace grievance, don't hesitate to reach out to us at info@bouldercrc.org.

In the meantime — if you haven't already, become a member! Your dues help us pay for legal advice, communication tools and our fight for a collective bargaining unit.

Arielle Milkman, CRC and Grievance Team Member

Allison's Testimony

My name is Allison Nowak Shelton, and I'm writing to express my extreme gratitude, support, and reverence for the CRC at CU-Boulder. In my final year of my PhD at Boulder, I had already endured 6 years of bureaucracy that made it clear that my contingent labor was undervalued, including being underpaid, and at times also paid late, paid the incorrect amount, and repeatedly given incorrect information. But in my final year, I was dealt a major blow.

I'll try to explain the situation as briefly as I can: due to some clerical error, I was wildly overpaid by the university at the end of a fiscal year. Realizing the error right away, I reported it to my department, who reported it to Employee Services. A few weeks later, I was contacted by ES and told that not only did I owe the overpay amount (which I had responsibly set aside), I also owed the overpay withholding taxes, which amounted to MORE THAN A MONTH'S PAY (I don't have to tell you what that means for any graduate student, let alone a grad student parent like me). They could not amend my tax materials because of the time of year, but I would get those taxes back, I was told, at the next tax refund cycle, MORE THAN A YEAR LATER.

Obviously, I refused, but was repeatedly intimidated about it over the next few months. As the case went further and further up the

bureaucratic ladder, no one, not even the dean, would agree to amend the situation.

Frustrated and truly downtrodden, I decided to reach out to the CRC. CRC representatives IMMEDIATELY rallied around me, firstly validating my frustration, and quickly gathering all their colleagues who might be able to help. I was looped into endless email chains in which other grad students just like me were taking time out of their busy schedules to: A) research the situation extensively, B) find me legal help, C) draft a letter of solidarity to the dean, and D) introduce me to local media representatives in case I needed to make this a very public fight. Because of their tireless efforts, I was given not only tangible, practical help that eventually led to my VICTORY in this pointless battle, but even more than that, I was no longer alone against a huge institution who was telling me to just give up. I was given a voice and a community to share in my struggle, and it made ALL the difference.

I have endless respect for the CRC and its members, who are smart, efficient, dogged warriors for graduate student rights. Because we deserve that. And I am also eternally grateful.

Sincerely,
Allison Nowak Shelton
PhD Candidate in English
University of Colorado Boulder



Strategy and Tactics

Introduction
By Tanya Roussy

This issue of *Class Struggle* is focused on international student working conditions. Almost 25% of graduate workers at CU Boulder are not from the United States and it's essential that we, as a union, understand the specific issues faced by international graduate students. As employees of the university we are incredibly divided – we are all atomized into our own departments, research groups, teaching sections, and so on. For international students this isolation can be especially keen: language and cultural barriers can compound a sense of loneliness and disconnectedness.

We aim to build an understanding of the many ways that our university fails our international colleagues.

I'm an international student from Canada. This might not seem very far culturally (or geographically!) but it's a world away in so many ways. I'm in the US on a student VISA, and sometimes feel like I'm being held hostage – I can't complain or push back against the injustices I experience or see because that might result in me getting kicked out of the country and being unable to finish my PhD. The university, and the state, have enormous leverage over me due to this one small fact.

Our bargaining power will grow from understanding our fellow students and their individual needs. As our union is increasingly able to demand meaningful job security for all graduate employees, international students will enjoy a safer and more secure working environment. This could include but is not limited to: greater legal resources for international students, reduced or eliminated visa fees, and guaranteed protection from discrimination based on visa status.

These are just a few reforms that could drastically help international students feel secure in their employment. As you read this issue of *Class Struggle*, help us to imagine what we need to fight for to improve the lives of all graduate workers – especially our international colleagues.

Financial burdens of being international

By Sinéad Ryan

For international students, the costs of entrance exams, application fees, visa expenses and international flights come to thousands of dollars. This is already a huge barrier for students applying to the US from abroad. While these expenses are unavoidable I feel that the college could do a lot more to ensure that pay checks, reimbursements, and starting bonuses arrive on time and in full.

I came to Boulder for a visiting weekend and was told I would receive a \$400 in reimbursement to pay for travel. The school insisted they could only reimburse me via check. I waited a month for them to mail it across the Atlantic Ocean. When I finally received it, the check was only made out for \$280. A never mentioned 30% tax had been added. They told me I could get the money back on my tax return but those promises evaporated when tax filing season came around.

Shortly after, on accepting my offer, I was charged a \$200 enrollment deposit. Perhaps this is to be expected in the US but I was totally unaware of this until I was asked to pay.

Things weren't much smoother after I arrived in Boulder. My first paycheck was due on 31st August. Most domestic students did not receive their paycheck until 7th September. As an international student, I did not receive my first paycheck until 13th September. A full two weeks after it was due. I had to wait a full month to receive the starting bonus that had been promised in my contract. A month and a half after finally receiving the starting bonus, I was told I owe \$260 dollars of taxes on the bonus. This tax was immediately posted to the balance on my student

portal. Since these taxes don't apply to domestic students, I wasn't warned.

The uncertainty of when I would be paid, what would be taxed, and by how much, added a lot of stress to what is already a difficult transition- moving countries and starting grad school. A little more transparency from the college would go a long way to international students' peace of mind.

One struggle, one fight

By Dhamma Kimpara

If the university wants to attract international grad workers – workers that make up 25% of their research output – why does the university impose the fee hardship on us when the costs for us are so high? On top of that, there's many additional costs associated with being an international student – plane fares, visa fees, random fees charged by the university. Not to mention the effort needed to adjust to a different culture, and the need to build a support network from scratch.

I certainly understand why international students may fear being involved with the union. We've been told that we have to be vigilant about making sure that all our documents are in order and that we comply with all the special rules and jump through all the hoops we need to jump through in order to stay here. Never are we educated on our rights and protections. So, we hesitate to stir up any trouble. I almost feel like we are talked to as this class of workers that have less rights and need to tiptoe around. So – fearing the worst – I found myself googling around to check if it was technically legal for me to join the CRC! Stepping back – I realized that this is absurd.

The right to form a union is part of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and is also an integral part of academic freedom as defined by the Declaration on Academic Freedom (Lima, 1988). I was checking to see if I could legally exercise a Human Right.

Reflecting this, I found the legal facts, and here is a quick snapshot of them:

- Regardless of immigration status, all workers have the right to freely express their views on issues concerning their employment at CU Boulder without fear for their visa status. This right is guaranteed by the laws and constitution of the United States.
- The US Department of State further [states](#): “[y]ou have this right regardless of your immigration status. Your employer cannot take action against you for asserting your rights.”
- [The US Department of Labor further explains](#) that “U.S. laws generally prohibit employers from retaliating against workers for exercising their workplace rights, regardless of the workers' immigration status.”

For those of you who know of any, friends, coworkers, classmates, show them their rights and protections! Empower them with the knowledge that they can demand a better wage and working hours! We need solidarity between all of us, for a quarter of us are international students.

Meme Zone

**CU Deans when
2500 graduate
workers demand a
fee waiver**



**CU Deans when
40,000 CU workers
demand a union**



Join our Slack by emailing us at info@bouldercrc.org

Spring Calendar

February 19th – Forum on affiliation (5:30pm @ Humanities 150). Intended for graduate workers, this will be an opportunity to discuss and debate the proposed affiliation strategy.

March 19th – Forum on affiliation (tba) Intended for all workers (university staff, contingent faculty, etc.).

Early April – Vote to affiliate with CWA

April 17-19 – Labor Notes 2020 conference in Chicago, IL. A team of CRC activists will attend this conference to sharpen our skills as organizers. Interested in attending? Email us at info@bouldercrc.org

All Semester – Canvas with the CRC! Sign up to be a canvasser [here](#).

Class Struggle

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