

December 2nd, 2014



THE AGITATOR

Newsletter of the University of Oregon
GRADUATE TEACHING FELLOWS FEDERATION
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ON STRIKE

December 2nd

FAIR CONTRACT NOW



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The GTFF does not stand alone.

Throughout this newsletter are segments from statements of support from a variety of community, state, national and international supporters. The full statements from these groups and individuals are available on our website.

A Word of Support from a Former GTFF President

This may have been the most intense contract campaign in the history of the GTFF. The past handful of weeks, as the online record indicates, have been harrowing to the extreme. And while the fortitude of each GTF invested in the undertaking has been tested, pressed, and strained, some very basic (some might say very true) ideas concerning fairness, compassion, and respect have hung and still hang in the balance. What this campaign stands for, what GTFs stand for: never has this been so tightly bound up with the promise and precarity of higher education itself, and of those who truly enact

higher education, amidst our increasingly austere, increasingly perfunctory financial-institutional culture.

For those who, like myself, participated in the campaign in its earlier phases but who, with the changing of the academic year, have found themselves in far-off places, no longer (at least for now) holding the title of GTF, the past week has been especially uncanny. Like watching your favorite TV series enter its next (its last?) season, twist unexpectedly but logically, deepening your affinity for the characters you love. Except

this campaign has, of course, been very real—stranger and heavier than fiction. As GTFs this week broadcast their message on a more amplified, and thereby more daunting, frequency, they should in any case never forget that those of us listening from afar continue, and will continue, to stand with them—in support, in friendship, and in solidarity. Every step of the way.

*David Craig
Philosophy
GTFF President 2013-14*

"the ASUO asserts our unequivocal support for the GTFF. Yes, our classes will be interrupted by a strike, but in order for us to receive a quality education, we need to take care of our instructors. If our GTFs are sick, or preoccupied with the stress of leaving their ill child at home, they cannot perform to the best of their abilities. As fellow students, we have a vested interest in what our GTFs experience, because we are dependent

on one another. Although some will undoubtedly point fingers at the GTFF and lay blame for this period of instability at their feet, we know that it is the university administration that is failing their obligation to finally provide a wage that meets our community's cost of living—this is not so much to ask."



*The Associated
Students of the
University of
Oregon Executive*

"It's appalling that University of Oregon graduate teaching fellows are paid so poorly and denied paid medical and parental leave, particularly while millions are spent on activities that do not support Oregon's academic mission.

As faculty, we understand the challenges faced by our graduate students and strongly support your efforts to obtain a fair contract that allows you to continue your commitment to the teaching and research mission of the University."



*José Padín
President
American Association of
University Professors, Oregon*



National Implications for GTFF Contract Resolution

Before arriving on campus in September as an out-of-state GTF, I was not aware of the ongoing labor negotiations between the UO Administration and the GTFF. During orientation, we were educated about the key remaining contract issues, and it seemed reasonable that all GTFs should expect the assurance of at least minimal paid leave and a wage based on the cost of living in Eugene, regardless of their workloads.

As I undertook my new teaching responsibilities in those first weeks, the need for a possible strike still seemed remote in my mind. At the same time, the words of our supervisors sounded in the background: you must teach ALL of your classes, there are no substitutes, even if you get sick. Several GTFF meetings later, and then a strike vote, and then stalled mediation with the Administration, and suddenly the

idea of a strike entered the realm of possibility.

I recently looked at the parameters of the unpaid federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), which applies to fewer than 50% of US workers. It includes twelve weeks of unpaid leave, if you meet its very narrow guidelines, and only if you can afford no pay for that long. Only 12% of US workers are currently covered through their employers, and less than 40% have such access through short-term disability insurance. These are deplorable figures. I am asking myself, as I hope you will ask yourselves too, what kind of a country do we want to live in? How are we going to change this reality for everyone in the United States?

Now we are nearing the eve of the possible strike. Here on campus, the mood is both sad and surreal.

We know there is still time for the Administration to prioritize meeting the needs of one of the lowest paid and most important sectors of its workforce. Paid leave is about the humane treatment of workers as human beings. They are benefits that can be used under very specific circumstances. Moreover, what GTFs are asking for has significance beyond our union itself. If we are forced to strike, it will be worth the effort in part because it will set a precedent that will help put this country on a better path.

My sincere hope is that the UO Administration stops playing its dangerous political game of chicken and comes to its senses in time to avert the strike, for the sake of everyone.

*Elizabeth Valdez
Graduate Teaching Fellow
Romance Languages / Spanish*

"as a Lane County Commissioner I've been supportive of all of the employees (and their right to organize) at the University of Oregon.

I'm very fortunate to have had many great graduate teaching fellows at the University. I earned my BA in geography, my MA in geography and my JD at the University.

I support the GTFs!"

*Pete Sorenson
Lane County Commissioner*

"Parental leave, maternity protection and sick pay are not equivalent to socialism, but are self-evident principles.

We wish you a lot of energy, courage and endurance with your struggles!"

Thomas Winhold & Mark Wiebe

The attempt of the university administration to keep International students from striking with (false) information about their visa restriction is scandalous!

*Hesse, Germany
Sector 5
ver.di*



"We, the graduate students of the AAUP-AFT of Rutgers University, applaud the bargaining efforts of the GTFF at the University of Oregon, and support your decision to strike. By insisting on a contract with humane conditions, the GTFF sets

an example for graduate students at other institutions, and we appreciate your efforts here at Rutgers.

We know first-hand what it is like to try to negotiate with an administration that is not willing to

listen or compromise. We know first-hand what it is like to be ignored as graduate student workers."



*The Rutgers
AAUP-AFT TA/GA
Steering Committee*



Historic Times for the GTFF and the University

As many people have pointed out, this term is the closest the GTFF has come to an actual strike action in its three-plus decades of existence. So far as the University of Oregon is concerned, this is therefore a truly historic time. Over the past few months, I have watched as our union's executive council has grown to a size which is absolutely unprecedented in my four years at the University of Oregon. I have seen the absolutely awe-inspiring dedication on the part of many first year stewards who have been willing to drag themselves to an overheated, crowded room with an hour's notice. I have seen the flourishing of the Contract Campaign Committee from a handful of dedicated and righteous members to a well-oiled machine, willing to canvass unfamiliar -- and in some cases outright hostile -- buildings.

I will admit that, especially at the beginning, I had profound reservations about a potential

strike action (hopefully I'm not the only one with a little voice in the back of my head which insists that I am "first and foremost a student" and that my insistence on being paid what I'm worth makes me an entitled little brat). After having the opportunity to work with such a fantastic E-Board and E-Council, however, seeing the sacrifices you are all willing to make, I have never been more confident that we are in a unique position to make a clear statement to the administration. If union presence at our informational pickets was at such capacity all last week, just imagine what our rallies during the strike will look like!

It is an honor to work, march, and act with all of you. We will prevail. We must.

*Jonathan Turbin
VP Organizing
Anthropology*

"We, the undersigned department heads and program directors, while affirming that we will continue to do our present jobs to the best of our abilities, do not agree with those members of the University Administration who tell us that it will be required as part of our jobs to engage in labor practices designed to break a legally declared strike, should it actually begin on December 2.

We do not think that the final demands the GTFF is negotiating for are unreasonable, and we strongly urge those responsible for negotiations on behalf of the University Administration to come to an agreement with the GTFF before a strike occurs. A strike would be damaging to the university community as a whole, a community already discouraged by other controversies and unexpected changes in leadership."

*Monique Balbuena, LAS
Yvonne Braun, AFR
Frederick (Rick) Colby, REL
Scott DeLancey, LING
Lynn Fujiwara, ES
Deborah Green, JDST
Mary Jaeger, HUM
Jeff Magoto, YLC
Bonnie Mann, PHIL
Eric Mentzel, MDVL
Elizabeth Reis, WGS
Anita Weiss, INTL*

"The Democratic Party of Lane County believes that the university's refusal to provide the members of your union with basic sick and parental leave is unacceptable and inconsistent with the values of our Party and community. We support paid sick and parental leave because we know that it boosts the purchasing power of working families, produces healthier children and offers more flexibility and equity for parents who divide the labor of childrearing.

Ironically, we know this because of research conducted by the man who

now serves as interim president of the university—Dr. Scott Coltrane.

In the December 2013 issue of *The Atlantic*, Dr. Coltrane wrote, 'new policies should focus on wage replacement and ensuring fair treatment of parents in the workplace, regardless of gender.'

We couldn't agree more."



*Chris Wig
Vice Chair
Democratic Party
of Lane County*



For many, difficult life situations need more than a hope for support

In May of 2012, one of my four sons who was a sophomore in high school at the time, suffered a serious concussion. I had just accepted my offer from the sociology PhD. program and was excited to begin my graduate studies. I had been raised in poverty, and had experienced the typical struggles of high achieving, low income students. I was just now going to begin graduate school at 40. One of my goals was to use my research to help other disadvantaged students.

For the next two years while I was busy working as a GTF and earning my master's degree, my son suffered from debilitating migraines and was unable to attend school. We were continually seeing doctors, getting tests and looking for a treatment that could help him. He had terrifying reactions to new medications, and struggled daily to keep his spirits up and not succumb to depression. I can honestly say it was the most painful and stressful time in my family's life.

I realize now how fortunate I was to be a GTF in the sociology department. Every professor I worked for was unbelievably supportive, kind and accommodating. For the most part, I did not feel as if I needed paid family leave. But looking back, I can see now that I should have taken more time off. Our family life was so chaotic and painful during that time, and I should have spent more time with my son. An unfair portion of the work and responsibility fell to my husband.

Now I am working as a research assistant for my GTF assignment. It is wonderful and I am very happy in it, but I have continued to have a son with health problems, and have been ill myself this term. I am working under fairly tight deadlines, and am struggling mightily to manage it all. Without paid leave, I

cannot imagine how I could have stayed in graduate school without a partner and an accommodating department.

Most of my research is on the barriers to social mobility experienced by disadvantaged groups. The lives of disadvantaged and nontraditional students are much more difficult and complicated than their counterparts. Issues such as a paid medical and parental leave can be the difference that allows access to a graduate degree. The educational path to upward mobility is incredibly difficult and fraught with risk. It is important that academia continue to expand our knowledge of the obstacles that impede mobility and the conditions that promote it. One important way to promote access to education is for universities to provide the support needed for its most vulnerable graduate students to finish their education.

My son is now a freshman physics major in the College Scholars program here at the UO. He has two classes taught by GTFs. It is ironic and painful to me that after all he has suffered, and after how hard he struggled to graduate high school and attend college on time, that he continues to experience obstacles to getting an education that are beyond his control. I ask for the university to consider the wellbeing of not only its graduate students, but its hardworking undergraduates as well.

Shauna Dyer
Sociology

"This unwillingness to provide the barest of amenities, two weeks paid sickleave and a living wage, counters the image of a learning institution that professes to be progressive and innovative. It's disappointing that the University of Oregon continues to spend its resources on lawyers and strike preparation instead of on resolution."

Ruth M. Atcherson
Treasurer



*International Alliance
of Theatrical Stage
Employees #675*

"We also want you know understand that while we would find a Graduate Teaching Fellow strike lamentable, we will do everything that we legally can to encourage all faculty to stand with our union colleagues.

GTFs are central to the teaching and research mission of the University of Oregon. It is their work as students seeking advanced degrees and their collaboration with faculty in so many ways that make this a research university; it is their work as teachers that fulfills the teaching mission of the university and inspires thousands of undergraduates enrolled here."



Michael Dreiling
President
United Academics



An open letter to Provost Bronet

Hi Frances,

Given the collegiality we established on the Tuition and Fees Advisory Board last year and your new position as Interim Provost, I'm hoping you can answer a few questions I have regarding the GTFF contract negotiations.

Why is the University Administration actively misleading the campus community about the state of the contract? It is a lie that the University Administration has moved a great deal during negotiations--the hired lawyer has done nothing but use leaps in logic to stone-wall at the bargaining table. . Also, the current Administration proposal is not a 9% pay increase--it is misleading to collapse the two-year contract in this manner. Your recent email also claimed that 72% of grad students do not take out loans, but what of the remaining 28%? You may be interested in a recent article ("The Real Student Debt Problem No One is Talking About", *Time*, Nov. 9, 2014) that demonstrates that graduate student debt accounts for 40% of total student debt in this country, meaning that those who do take out loans are taking out massive amounts. This would largely be resolved with our proposed increase to the minimum wage. Moreover, why is the administration taking credit for added healthcare benefits?

The added benefits to our health insurance were brokered entirely by the Healthcare Trust independent of bargaining. It is not the University Administration but rather a few diligent and hardworking graduate teachers and GTFF staff who brokered these added benefits--at reduced cost to the University no less!

Finally, please explain to me the glaring omission in your latest email regarding paid parental and sick leave. I take personal offense to this. Is it the position of the University Administration that graduate teachers who are hit by cars, such as I was last fall, should immediately return to the classroom out of fear of losing their health insurance when they need it most? Is it the position of the University Administration that graduate students, women especially, should be forced to choose between putting their personal or academic lives on hold? I can only assume that the Administration's silence on this matter is due to internal confusion regarding how to interpret President Coltrane's own research.

The position of the Administration is not at all fair to the undergraduate or graduate students of UO, let alone our advisors who double as our supervisors. It is not pedagogically sound. The

University Administration's strike recommendations has placed my own advisor, current Chair of the Philosophy Department, into an awkward position. Why is the Administration attempting to pit Faculty against their own students' reasonable demands? Further, GTFs may be students, but we are also employees who teach nearly a third of the total FTE at UO. The University makes an incredible amount of money from the courses we teach; why is it so unreasonable for us to ask for a living wage and what is, in most other countries, not a privilege but a right to paid parental and sick leave? You say we are among "the best and brightest," but how can you expect us to perform at our best as students and teachers if we can't even pay for dinner and worry about the stability of our health insurance? In order to attract and maintain the best and brightest researchers in career training, the University Administration needs to offer the best contract possible. The costs of our demands are not exorbitant, and we have both seen the University budget.

So what gives (or doesn't)?

*Dana Rognile
Philosophy*

VP at Large, AFT-Oregon

"We believe that the University of Oregon has the responsibility to provide a quality education for students, to pay living wages to all workers on campus, and to support the economy of the surrounding community.

Currently, the stalling of contract negotiations with the Graduate Teaching Fellows Federation has had a negative impact on students, workers, and the community. Thousands of graduate students are without a contract for nearly six months because administrators

have refused to take up proposals that would benefit everyone on campus and in our community."



*The Student
Labor Action
Project (SLAP)*



A letter to International GTFFs

To my fellow International GTFFs.

To the GTFFs teaching their native languages, literature and culture here at UO

To the GTFFs providing crucial work - research as well as teaching - in the hard sciences.

Please don't be afraid. Please don't let anyone intimidate you. As workers in the US we are protected by the same labor laws as US citizens and therefore we cannot be fired or deported for going on strike.

Our visa status is mainly tied to our student status and I want to remind you, we are not striking as students - but we are striking at workers. We won't teach our classes, but we will still attend our own seminars and we will continue or own course work.

But we won't let people threatened us.

Our visas - and this has been used as official pressure - won't easily lose validity, especially not as long as we keep up our student work.

However - the financial burden is immense and I'm speaking for myself as well as for probably most of my International brothers and sisters when I am telling you that I cannot risk a pay reduction. I cannot risk this kind of financial hardship. Going on strike means risking my - already shaky financial stability.

However, I can also not risk to get sick. I cannot afford to compensate another GTFF for doing my work and I cannot expect that someone else is doing my work without being compensated.

As International student I cannot take out loans.

I cannot easily call my family and ask them for support. And even if your family can financially support you, wiring money from a foreign account to a US account can be a serious hassle.

As International grad student I'm completely at the mercy of my sponsor. And guess who that is? The UO.

Now some people might be under the old fashioned impression that the benefits provided for workers in the US are better than benefits provided in other countries around the world. And for some countries that might be true, however did you know that it is a European standard to get up to 50 days off for cancer treatment? Guess how many days you get in the US? None.

Coming from Germany for example, providing services for this university: teaching my language, teaching culture and history and film, part taking in extra curricular activities and supporting my students with recommendations for study abroad programs I am actually willingly agreeing to a benefits cut.

Having this knowledge and knowing that I can go back home at any time could potentially lead me to ignoring these issues here on campus. It's not my country, it's not my system, I cannot even vote here, why should I even care?

But I care because this is my university too. For at least 5 years this is my community too. I live here. I made friends here and it breaks my heart to see how people struggle so hard, so hard, to stand up for them to politely demand the minimum. Two weeks of

medical leave. Two weeks.

We are modestly demanding the pure minimum of security for one of our financially weakest groups on campus and within this group the most vulnerable - the International GTFFs.

GTFF positions enable for most departments to being able to attract foreigners. That's why we come here. It enables departments to compete internationally, to build up research groups, to start exchanges and to enrich the UO's course offer and its international portfolio. We need to make sure that we don't invite people under wrong pretenses. We need to make sure once they are here they will be safe. Whether they are healthy, or sick.

I ask the UO administration: Please don't threaten us. Protect us!

*Judith Lechner
German and Scandinavian
GTFF President 2012-13*

"We believe that all of the GTFFs should be entitled to paid sick leave. It is of benefit to the entire University to encourage workers to stay home when they are ill. We also support GTFFs having a living wage that matches the local cost of living. We support all efforts necessary to ensure that the GTFFs receive a fair contract. "



*SEIU Local 085
Executive Committee*



From the Editor

The Editorial Committee for The Agitator is very pleased to have received so many submissions to the newsletter. Keep them coming to member.communications@gtff.net!

If you do submit, we ask that you submit up to 300 words in a Word document with standard formatting. Also, don't forget to include a title!

Staying informed & connected is easier than ever!

- We want feedback! Tell us what you think about the newsletter at: member.communications@gtff.net
- Come to membership meetings and social events! (see calendar on pg. 1 for times and locations)
- Join the Facebook group: GTFF3544
- Follow on Twitter: @GTFF_3544
- Check out the website: www.GTFF3544.net

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*Want to contribute to
your union newsletter?*

*Submissions of all sorts are
welcome!*

*Contact your
VP Membership
Communications at
[member.communications@
gtff.net](mailto:member.communications@gtff.net) for more
information!*



About the GTFF

Our Mission Statement:

"The Graduate Teaching Fellows Federation, a union of the graduate employees of the University of Oregon, commits to creating a strong, safe, and diverse community of educators and scholars for the purpose of protecting and promoting the interests of its membership."

The Graduate Teaching Fellows Federation (GTFF) is a labor union representing over 1300 Graduate Teaching Fellows and Research Assistants at the University of Oregon in Eugene, Oregon.

Our goals are:

- to improve the quality of life for GTFs in the areas of salary, workload and working conditions through collective bargaining and the enforcement of our contract,
- to fight for an adequately funded educational system, accessible for all people, and
- to help create a revitalized, socially aware union movement, which is a positive force for change for the entire community. Volunteers and activists are welcome!