

# Student Unionism and Sustaining Student Power

**Charlie Eaton**

The progressive American student movement has proved itself one of our country's most powerful political forces over the last seventy years. Although now forgotten by most historians, the first mass student strikes for free speech were launched in the 1930s. New Left activists revived the free speech movement in the early 1960s. By the end of that decade, students had helped advance desegregation, forced LBJ out of a reelection bid, and regained the power to shut down America's universities with sit-ins and strikes.

Today, American students are beginning to wield their power again, shutting down the 1999 WTO meeting, forcing private prison companies off campus, winning campus living wage policies, and making their schools "sweat-free." However, as in the sixties, the student movement is having to rebuild itself from scratch. Each time the movement realizes its power, it fails to sustain it.

Consequently, corporate America and other outside forces have diluted curriculum, pushed tuition hikes, and kept American higher education largely inaccessible to poor people and people of color. In recent years, we have even seen conservatives begin to roll back what token affirmative action programs exist in higher education. These problems have advanced in large part because students and faculty have been disempowered in university decision making.

The student movement need not continue this way. The American student movement can sustain itself this time around with a new brand of student unionism that borrows the best aspects of the labor movement, past American student movements, and foreign student movements. Such unionism could open U.S. universities to the disenfranchised and make student power and campus democracy realities.

## **Creating Sustainable Power in a Student Union Movement**

A national student organization that could form the basis for a union already exists in America: the United States Student Association (USSA). Its leaders are diverse, radical, and militant. It boasts nearly 2 million members (though many are inactive or even unaware of their member-

ship). Moreover, students owe USSA much unpaid thanks for its victories in enhancing access to higher education and preserving affirmative action.

Founded in 1946, USSA is a national federation of student governments. Student governments affiliate by an affirmative referendum vote at public universities in which students vote to pay a portion of their student fees as membership dues to USSA. Student government executive boards can also vote to affiliate with USSA and pay membership dues for the school as a whole based on size of the student body population.

USSA differs in many significant ways from labor unions. Most notably, USSA lacks any form of collective bargaining with universities. Thus it allocates membership and affiliate dues to lobbying for legislation for student rights as well as better and more accessible higher education. USSA also uses the dues to win new affiliates and mobilize students to advance their interests locally and nationally. However, USSA and other student activists have not yet succeeded in fundamentally changing how universities make decisions. This change could yet be made by USSA in partnership with other unions of academic workers and the grassroots base of United Students against Sweatshops (USAS).

### **Unions Rising at New York University**

In 2001, our USAS affiliate at NYU focused much of its energy on forcing NYU to recognize and bargain with the Graduate Student Organizing Committee, or GSOC-UAW. In the fall, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) recognized NYU's graduate student employee union, the first recognized grad union at a private university. The NLRB then instructed NYU to bargain with the union. NYU, being a corporate-controlled university, opted instead to break the law and refused to negotiate with GSOC.

Anticipating the NLRB decision, our USAS affiliate started working with GSOC in the fall to mobilize undergrads to fight NYU's antiunion campaign. We prioritized this campaign for four main reasons, reasons I hope everyone will consider who attends a school with a student employee unionization drive:

1. Grad unionization was and is vital to the quality of our education. Our slogan is: "Our TAs' working conditions are our learning conditions." And if NYU had forced a recognition strike, there would have been no teaching or learning at all.
2. We could not allow our own university to deny grad student employees their right to organize a union, particularly when NYU supposedly stands against other sweatshops.

3. NYU had already spent four million dollars of our tuition money on a union-busting law firm named Proskauer and Rose. This money should have gone to education, not union busting.
4. Grad student unionization makes NYU a more democratic university. Collective bargaining would give another disempowered segment of our community institutionalized and sustained power over university decision making. In that way, it reverses the centralization of power in the hands of corporate administrators and trustees.

Presented with these four lines of reasoning, undergrads responded with overwhelming support for the Graduate Student Union and union recognition. About three thousand students signed petitions demanding that the university enter into collective bargaining with the union. As icing on the cake, our student government reversed its year-old antiunion position after sixty students blockaded and shut down one of their meetings in protest. They then voted seventeen to one in support of the union. With this public backing, we were able to organize three rallies, each with over three hundred people in attendance.

Public pressure and persuasion, of course, did not work. So at the beginning of March, GSOC called a strike authorization vote. Our USAS group began planning a building occupation to demand union recognition on the 4 April Student Labor Day of Action. The day before the strike vote, NYU put its tail between its legs and announced that it would recognize and bargain with GSOC, the first private university grad student union. Thus we won without even going to war.

The point of interest is why we won. The threat of a strike was unquestionably what forced NYU to recognize the union. However, grad union leaders insist that undergrad organizing was essential to the campaign. NYU knew it could not win, because most undergrad students would refuse to cross GSOC's picket lines along with the five other major unions at NYU. In addition, a large core of undergrads would actually disrupt university operation on top of the strike. Moreover, as an antisweatshop group with a reputable national organization behind us, our campaign was drawing similarities between NYU and sweatshops that were detrimental to NYU's we-want-to-be-Ivy-League PR campaign.

So, against all the odds, NYU's grad students succeeded in organizing the first-ever grad student union at a private university. Their unionization means more than a policy change to increase their pay or health benefits. It means they will be included through collective bargaining in making every major decision that affects their employment. It radically changes the way a private university makes decisions. And the grad students won without even a strike, because the vast majority of NYU's students, workers, and faculty were united behind them.

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As the graduate students realized their victory, we undergrads considered that while we fought a winning struggle together with the grad student union, we still had no formal power of our own in the university. The consequences of our disempowerment are real and fall disproportionately upon low-income students and students of color. Some examples follow: NYU has resisted the creation of a campus rape crisis center and the revision of its sexual misconduct policy; tuition plus room and board has been hiked to about thirty-five thousand dollars; and at a school with two thousand Latino students, we have no Latino studies program. Our immediate answer to these problems was to run a slate of candidates for student government.

In the spring, we founded the Progressive Student Coalition at NYU with Womyn's Center, Latinos Unidos Con Honor y Amistad, the Campus Greens, and other allies. The coalition of fifteen groups ran a Progressive slate of candidates for student government. The existing student government fought us every way they could, even barring two of our candidates from running.

Nevertheless, we won a third of the seats on our student government's executive committee. One of our candidates won the vice-chairmanship of the council. Moreover, we have the only cohesive block of senators on the council.

What our senators will be able to do with this remains to be seen. But I hope, in light of the prounion sentiment and strength of undergrad organizing at NYU, that we will take a shot at building a union for all students that can sustain our power. Specifically, I would like to see the Progressive Student Coalition win a majority in our student government with a campaign pledge to reconstitute our student government as an independent student union. That union would seek recognition by NYU. Recognition would mean NYU administrators engaging in collective bargaining with our elected student representatives over a binding contract on university operations. That way, we could advance our challenge to many manifestations of sweatshops, especially our own university as a sweatshop.

## **Going National**

USSA, USAS, and academic labor unions could go national with a Student Union Campaign to reconstitute USSA's affiliated student governments as student unions and seek their recognition by universities. The campaign could seek collective bargaining for students in order to advance USSA's signature issue, universal access to higher education, a right that American students lack because of their disempowerment.

The effort to enhance equal access to higher education could manifest in demands for written agreements or contracts to reduce tuition, institute real affirmative action, and provide more financial aid. These bargaining demands would form the cornerstone of the campaign because they highlight the need for real student power in decision making. The labor movement did not unionize millions and win collective bargaining for them because workers felt a philosophical need for a democratic workplace. The labor movement succeeded because impoverished, suffering workers needed democratic power over company decisions in order to reverse exploitative company policies. A student union struggle can be no different.

The point of conflict may not be tuition or affirmative action. The point of conflict that will mobilize students sufficiently may not even emerge for ten years. But a major issue will mobilize American students en masse again eventually. And when it does, demands for sustained student empowerment and bargaining rights must be made synonymous with the issue at hand. Otherwise, we will find ourselves rebuilding the student movement from scratch, just as we have before.

USAS and its core of grassroots militants could seek to take over student governments and affiliate them with USSA while USSA runs the Student Union Campaign. USAS could tie its efforts to the Student Union Campaign by making the campaign's demands the core of its election platforms along with USAS's current demands for campus worker rights and university membership in the Worker Rights Consortium. Thus USAS would function as a kind of organizing caucus within the Student Union Campaign that ideologically links the struggle to the labor movement.

Once student unionism is established, students might even make demands in line with USAS's developing notion of workplace and university democracy. Such demands might include election of university presidents and/or boards of trustees.

The absence of laws and institutions that protect student rights parallel to labor law and the NLRB will form an obstacle in winning student union recognition. However, if students organize en masse, recognition is possible. While the labor movement stumbled in its early years, it succeeded in organizing several million workers and winning gains for them without the aid of positive labor law. The Supreme Court even tried to outlaw the union shop under the Sherman Anti-Trust Act, according to Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine in their biography of John L. Lewis.<sup>1</sup> Amid these circumstances, the United Mine Workers succeeded in organizing nearly every one of America's 700,000 mine workers in the early 1930s. Moreover, the UMW refused to rely on NLRB union elections and enforcement through 1960 because its leadership refused to

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take required anticommunist oaths. A student union movement can make headway without laws protecting student rights as well.

In the meantime, students might build majority support for their rights by asking why students lack something similar to collective bargaining rights if workers are entitled to them. If unions and progressives ask the same question, it will carry even more weight. If the public rejects the idea that students are entitled to something like collective bargaining rights, the idea should be simplified. Students need the right to a union that can make demands of and sign agreements with administrations. We do not need ladder-climbing student governments that make unheeded suggestions.

Regardless, if students mobilize and enable ourselves to effectively shut down America's universities, demands for union recognition and greater access to higher education will be met. After all, America cannot function, business as usual, without the research conducted by its universities.

The bargaining goal and disruption strategy would be all the more achievable if we enlist the solidarity of unions representing university employees. University employees will be ever-more willing to lend a hand in light of recent student victories for campus living wages and union rights and against collegiate sweatshops. Unions might also bring their legislative might into a coalition of progressives that could push for state and federal laws favoring campus democracy and student union rights.

## **Power Sustained**

Foreign student movements demonstrate that sustained student power is possible. In Sweden, for example, the entire higher education system is publicly owned and operated, tuition is free, and every student is a dues-paying member of the student union. Further, every academic department is governed by a committee with about one-third of its members representing the student union. The remaining committee members belong to the faculty union.

Anna-Clara Ollson, a former organizer for the Swedish student union, concedes that the union cannot always mobilize students to take advantage of and augment their institutional power.<sup>2</sup> However, the Swedish arrangement itself does not make students complacent or impede their mobilization (as seen by their recent protest at the European Union summit). Rather, it preserves their influence and power between mobilizations, guards against losses between mobilizations, and makes participation in decision making easier than a sit-in.

Students have won similar degrees of power in different forms in

Greece, France, and Mexico. At the Autonomous University of Mexico, organizers took two hundred thousand students out on strike to defeat the initiation of tuition. They also demanded more student self-governance of the university, despite already having a power-sharing system that makes American universities seem like *maquiladoras*.

The U.S. student union movement should also draw on the successful models of class solidarity and collective bargaining that American organized labor developed in the 1930s. The American labor movement stumbled in its first fifty years much as the student movement has for the past seventy. American workers took millions out on strike, launched huge demonstrations, and fought massive military and police repression such as the Ludlow and Haymarket massacres. However, until the mid-1930s, membership in American labor unions rarely passed three million and America's workers lived in desperate poverty.

As I mentioned earlier, the labor movement took off only after it forced the acceptance of the collective bargaining system as a norm and the passage of the National Labor Relations Act in the 1930s. Moreover, the advent of industrial unionism produced broader solidarity among workers and even more massive mobilization. Subsequently, labor secured the eight-hour day, forty-hour week, and five-day work week. Workers forced dramatic wage increases and improved workplace conditions and worker benefits. Most importantly, labor's power in the workplace was sustained by regularized collective bargaining for union contracts.

The student movement should initiate a struggle to sustain and institutionalize its power without neglecting mass mobilization. Students need a system of oppositional unionism that, like collective bargaining, substitutes negotiation for suggestion and places students on a level playing field with administrators in decision making.

### **Parallels and Differences between Students, Workers, and Their Unions**

While students can benefit by adopting some of the strategies of labor unions, students and workers differ in significant ways that might affect strategies for organizing student unions. For instance, students do not uniformly suffer from lack of material well-being as workers might suffer either as a class or collective bargaining unit.

American universities are highly stratified along class and racial lines. Elite private schools disproportionately admit white and upper-class students. Meanwhile, state and community colleges enroll significantly higher numbers of low-income students and people of color (depending on

region). Nevertheless, students at most institutions of higher education—private college, public university, or community college—differ substantially in family and personal income. Consequently, students’ needs for tuition reduction and financial aid possess less commonality than the wage demands of textile workers—or professors, for that matter.

Nevertheless, students’ developing role in the production process improves chances for their unionization. Students increasingly conduct research (work that we pay tuition to do) that our universities provide, often free of charge, for multinational corporations. Further, public schools have accelerated a move away from liberal arts education and toward job-specific training, frequently funded by corporate donations. Thus, Naomi Klein notes in *No Logo*, “The pedagogical benefits technology brings to the classroom are dubious at best, but the fact remains that employers are clamoring for tech-trained graduates and chances are the private school . . . is equipped with all the latest gadgets and toys.”<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps more importantly, students do have commonalities and a shared identity that makes solidaristic union organizing possible. At any given university, students will have different material interests, racial identities, and cultures. Yet, like most workers on campus, we are all excluded from university decision making.

From time to time, student protest will force a university policy decision in our interest. But this power over university decision making is rarely sustained. And students’ disempowerment has real consequences which, as noted in the case of NYU, fall disproportionately on low-income students and people of color.

## Co-opting Students

Students took initial steps toward sustaining their power at the height of the antiwar movement in the late 1960s. Radicals took over student governments and reconstituted them. Some public universities even granted student and/or worker representation on their boards of trustees. Perhaps most importantly, laws were passed and policies instituted creating student fees, primarily at public universities.

The student fee system provides for a small fee from the students’ tuition to go directly to their student government or student association. These fees, like union dues in form and function, provide resources outside the influence of administrators for student governments to advocate for students.

Student fees hold the potential to provide the financial independence needed for a more oppositional form of student unionism. However, in



the past twenty years, most student governments have not recognized the difference of interests between administrators and students. Nor have students sought to bargain and force written agreements or contracts with administrators on crucial disputed policies like tuition, class size, housing and dining hall quality, affirmative action, and interdepartmental curricular issues.

Instead, administrators have succeeded in co-opting many student governments. Administrators and trustees have solidified their hold on university governance in the past thirty years while rhetorically they maintain that a community of scholars, including students, governs the university.

Thus students rest content, in the absence of crisis, with decision-making power limited to participation in advisory committees stacked with administrators. These committees typically delay all decisions and ultimately make a sure-to-be-ignored recommendation to the university president, who is formally accountable only to a self-perpetuated board of trustees.

In this “community of scholars,” administrators pamper loyal student leaders and make them feel important. Hence, student government leaders warn against being too critical of the administration. I recall a student senator at my own New York University arguing, “We can’t make budget recommendations for everything students want because then they won’t listen to our budget recommendations.” The senator stared at me blankly when I asked why we even make budget recommendations if we can’t ask for what we want.

The point is that students need not an advisory student government but rather an independent student union, which demands what students need and then mobilizes them to get it. Such independence and militance requires formal recognition that student power does not lie in reasonable persuasion of self-interested, corporate administrators and trustees. Instead, student power lies in students’ ability to act en masse and to act to disrupt normal operation of the university if necessary.

### **Law and a Long-Term Empowerment Strategy**

Student unions can win union recognition and sign binding contracts to enhance access to quality higher education through mass mobilization in the short term, particularly at historically progressive schools. But the student union movement may languish just as the early labor movement did until we build majority support and codify student rights into law.

Laws mandating campus democracy and student union rights stand little chance in the near future. However, if we want such laws to be

passed in the long term, they should be formulated, introduced, and advocated now. They might even stand a chance of partial passage in progressive states like Massachusetts, Vermont, or even in California by ballot initiative or legislature.

State legal initiatives in the late 1960s and early 1970s created campus democracy footholds with student fees and student representation to boards of trustees. These laws can be built upon with requirements for student union rights at public universities and schools that receive public funding.

The U.S. military forced homophobic recruitment visits on NYU's law school this year by threatening to have federal grants to NYU canceled if recruiters were not allowed on campus. Military recruiters had been banned at NYU for more than two decades because of the military's anti-gay recruitment policy. With the help of progressive and labor allies, campus democracy policies could be forced on private universities by putting this reactionary legislative tactic to good use.

The American student movement has already lent its might to struggles against sweatshops and globalization with impressive results. If organized labor and American progressives want the student movement to help carry those struggles forward, they will need to lend their resources, their legislative power, and their solidarity to help empower students.

Such reciprocal solidarity forms the key to organizing student unions. Reciprocal solidarity is really a repetition of terms, but I say it because many people forget that solidarity goes two ways; workers can help students, too. Student-labor solidarity means students and workers building power together. And real solidarity enables us to realize the shared power of students who produce ideas and workers who produce essential goods in a global society connected by technology and information.

## Notes

1. Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine, *John L. Lewis: A Biography* (New York: Quadrangle, 1977).

2. Anna-Clara Ollson, personal interview with the author, 18 July 2001.

3. Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (New York: Picador, 2000).