

GEU BARGAINING TOWNHALL Q&A

PANEL: SARA BIJANI (GEU PRESIDENT), CAROLYN PRATT VAN WYCK (CO-LEAD NEGOTIAOTOR 2015), PATY JAIMES (EES STEWARD & PARENT ADVOCATE), KATIE CARLINE (MEMBER DEFENSE), JON CURTISS (AFT MI)

WHO IS ON OUR BARGAINING TEAM & WHO SITS AT THE TABLE?

Last time we had 3 lead negotiators, anyone who was on the team could be in the room during negotiations. Jon Curtiss and Sonya from AFT helped with the bargaining process. Research is a huge piece of what needs to happen. Our bargaining team is whoever we say it is, university can't determine this. We collectively decide what we want to bargain for, do research on those items, people who are prepared will sit at the table and defend those items. Bargaining team members have to be confirmed by membership.

U of M GEO drew out planks with smaller sub teams who specialized on the issues. The best team looks like the membership- across departments, and nationalities, etc. The other piece of the bargaining team is the organizers. Most of our power comes from people who are visibly supporting the team at the table through actions. Can be as large as a sit in, or as small as filling out a survey

One of the most impactful things that happened during last negotiations at MSU, was that the university wanted to drastically reduce tuition waiver- finally sent out a last minute survey and hundreds of people wrote back talking about how it would impact them, if they would leave, if they never would have came to begin with- our bargaining team read this at a bargaining meeting, AND WE WON!

WHO IS ON THEIR SIDE OF THE TABLE?

Office of Employee Relations, designee from provost office, deans from different colleges. Will be led by Rick Fanning who used to be outside legal counsel for MSU (private practice attorney) on MSU's side in arbitration. Jim Nash (former director of OER) was really unprofessional and rude as well as his second in command Kathie Elliot. The folks at the table now are much nicer, but they will have the same bad policies. Also assistant deans will be there. Academics have to be kind of coerced to be on their team, and sometimes they will actually be on our side. These folks will see what TAs and RAs do as a privilege. Because some of them are in charge of administering academic programs that need grad students, they can be more easily swayed than OER who will always prioritize money. The current Ombudsperson, Robert Caldwell, suggested that he will be on the bargaining team (he's about to retire).

WHAT IS OUR TIMELINE?

Contract expires May 2019. We have build out a timeline to get us prepared. It was started at the stewards retreat this summer. The first step was delivering our bargaining survey to figure out what the needs are. We are currently processing that information and there will be a presentation on the findings at the General Membership Meeting on April 13. We will be discussing planks (areas to be bargained in the contract) at that meeting as well. Some have been identified already, and we are currently working on procedures to standardize that process to have more added. We will need to do research over the summer. We will propose preliminary bargaining platform at Fall GMM and get feedback. Then we will continue fleshing out proposals through fall semester. Notice of intent to bargain send in November and start bargaining beginning of spring, hopefully!

WHO IS A PART OF THE BARGAINING UNIT?

Any TA is a part of the unit and covered by the contract. RAs get the same benefits as well as other GAs with university employment so they are also included in the process. Also we will be working on reclassification issue to get teaching exempt students back into our unit. Undergraduate Learning Assistants are a totally different thing but we could look more into a Montreal style union where all students are a part of the union but I'm not sure we have the support from the membership. No law prohibits that we ask that, but there is a strategic question if it makes sense. University of California's units includes those students (but they are very transient sometimes only being employed for one semester.) Also organizing these folks is a huge project. Bigger problem is misclassified grad students, like writing center employees, and math learning center.

WHAT WOULD CONSEQUENCES BE OF UNIONIZING RAS?

University just wouldn't do it. Board of trustees have to sign any tentative agreement as well as a majority of our membership. State Labor Board would not conduct an election to do this. The only scenario in which that would happen is if every RA went on strike until they had a recognized union. They can still join as associate members though. Recognition clause doesn't exclude teaching exempt students directly, but some definitions define the graders who keep office hours as excluded. We should strike this because it doesn't make any sense.

WHAT DOES THE PROCESS OF NEGOTIATING THESE CLASSIFICATION ISSUES LOOK LIKE?

There are a couple possible ways to bring new workers into existing unions. One is the option above where we negotiate to strike the exemption language. We could also file a petition for those people to vote yes and join the union. This would be a large project but management has less control that way.

HOW DO WE COMMUNICATE WITH GRAD ASST. ABOUT CONTRACT NEGOTIATIONS?

Stewards talk to department and we also present at orientations. Sometimes orientations don't let us in, and sometimes departments don't have stewards. We only have access to TAs information. We send regular emails and we go door to door organizing and we have general membership meetings.

WHAT IS UP FOR DEBATE IN THE CONTRACT?

Dependent care & Health insurance, and we also want to get Child care- U of M was successful doing this. One of the most important things is that we need support from both parents and non parents on these issues. Last time we asked there wasn't a lot of support. We met with Student Parent Resource Center and we talked about collaborating on video testimonies about how the benefits impact their rights. Phrase this in ways that MSU cares about like graduation rates, prestige of fellowships, and published research. Work Life office said they would support another town hall to talk more specifically about these issues, publicized in media, target administrators to attend. Ideally this would be held in the fall, and we need people to show up and organize!!

Anything that is in the current contract can be renegotiated. See the contract here: <https://www.hr.msu.edu/contracts/documents/GEU2015-2019.pdf>

WHAT ARE THE REQUIRED SUBJECTS FOR BARGAINING?

Economic subjects are mandatory- working conditions, pay, overall compensations, hours. Non-economic issues can also be bargained, things like anti-harassment, sick leave, etc.

DOES PRECEDENT MATTER ABOUT ISSUES LIKE THE CHILD CARE? DO WE HAVE DATA?

Work life balance office has preliminary data, but they did say that most schools that have it is mainly used to recruit faculty. University of California has really good child care. We need to make really strong reasons and collective power to prove we need it. We should also talk more to U of M about this. MSU doesn't provide child care support to anyone. We make less than faculty so we need it more. This is a big part of the research phase. Make the argument- why would people come here if we rank so low? MSU's main benchmarks are U of M and Northwestern- both have so much more than we do

CAN WE GO ON STRIKE?

Technically no. Workers in the private sector have the right to strike but that doesn't mean you can't replace them with other workers. Public workers in MI don't have that right. No distinction between work stoppage for political reasons, than any other reason they don't show up. If one person does it they will get disciplined, if everyone does it, then likely no punishment. If enough people do it, we could do it. Culturally right now, we are seeing a lot of activity around striking that has not really happened in a long time. Strikes have to be well planned. GEO at U of M routinely walks out during contract negotiations without penalty but not without threats.

WHAT ABOUT THE SPEAK TEST?

We are definitely working on this issue. It is a pre-condition of employment and is really problematic. Special conference will be scheduled in late May for this to recommend changes to it. Depending how this goes, we will shape what we want to ask for. This will be tricky to bargain. We have to frame it as the test itself is extremely biased. It will be a combination of negotiations outside the contract, and also adding protective language in the contract, like having a clear rubric. Katie was required to take it as a Canadian and was then turned away based on appearance and accent when she arrived.

Anything can be brought up as contract language and see what sticks. Even if it doesn't land in the contract, it could still be organized around by the union. The year after contracts can be some of the most interesting years to organize, trying to get things that didn't work in the contract. Attitudes are important. Is the university trying to keep international students out of the classroom or are they trying to offer resources to meet their needs?

WHAT ABOUT PARKING?

University wants to take it away every time we negotiate. We want free parking everywhere. They refuse to build enough vertical lots which limits parking. Deans will not get on our side for this issue. We could look at how this aligns with American Disabilities Act. Aside from this ADA compliance issue, you can use loading docks to unload large amounts of stuff. We also tried to get bus passes, we didn't win, but it seems winnable with more support and being prioritized. We also had a lot of organizational challenges internally that happened when we started bargaining last time that is better now. Faculty get bus passes but only because they don't use them.

CAN OBSERVERS BE IN THE ROOM?

One of the first things we bargain is who can be in the room. We want it to be public. They want no one to be there. No limit to the size of our team so observers can be on the team.

ARE THERE RULES ABOUT RECORDING BARGAINING SESSIONS?

Maybe we should pay for a short term license for a speech to text to take notes for us? This is also something that would be bargained first. We can argue accessibility for this. We also can argue that we use our bargaining notes to solve issues.

Sonya told a funny story about ground rules we agreed to - we agreed to 24 hour notice before media. Charlie was live tweeting during all the sessions. A lot of higher ed locals are setting up no tweeting rules thanks to us.

WHAT SURPRISED YOU MOST AT THE TABLE?

Lack of professionalism and the disdain. Carolyn had heard stories of Jim Nash but experiencing it was astounding. Kathie Elliot went on a rant about how women with children should think long and hard about going to grad school.

Part of bargaining survival is making lots of jokes. Memes of redone cereal boxes. Kathie Elliot said the reason membership was showing up at food banks was that they weren't making tough decisions about buying generic and not putting meat in the spaghetti sauce and related that to our fight for dependent health care.

Jon volunteered for bargaining team at U of M when he was a grad school, he was so enraged and felt disrespected that he wanted to become president. What is surprising now is the ability to build a relationship with the folks across the table. Hard to do this when no one is here very long.

Health care discussion- Jim Nash said he wanted to be out of it. Carolyn suggested we could all fight together for single payer healthcare. He said we have universal health care, it's called obama care, Carolyn's jaw dropped.

Sara recently met with Robert Caldwell- we were saying we wanted to be inclusive of other GAs, and he said oh that's not how it used to be, the hostility is a theatre and a game, and if we don't do it both sides will be disappointed.

DO WE HAVE TO AGREE TO GROUND RULES?

We could say we don't want to bother with ground rules. They're not required and its normally laws any way.

HOW DOES ALUMNI UNION SUPPORT WORK?

Curtis Hurtell- State senator came to support us during a grade in at a bargaining session. MSUs alumni networks are trashed right now, so if we can bring in alumni who donate or effect donations that would be huge. Letters to the editors matter, calling board of trustees matter, especially folks not subject to the contract.

HAS THERE BEEN ANY TALK IN THE PAST OF ESTABLISHING LIFE INSURANCE AS A TA BENEFIT?

Our parent union already provides life insurance to member. To the best of my knowledge, it has not been discussed in the past. For more information: <https://www.aft.org/member-benefits/aft-endorsed-insurance>

HOW DO WE DECIDE WHAT WE ARE WILLING TO COMPROMISE AND WHAT WE ARE WILLING TO STAND FIRM ON?

We don't trade one issue for another. We begin developing our bargaining proposals from our bargaining survey, which allows us to understand the priorities of our members. From there, we write our planks, which then become our bargaining platform after the fall general membership vote for approval. We will be able to win every single issue we bring to the table if we are organized, and if our membership turns out to make the importance of these issues clear. Alternatively, if the membership isn't organized, and if they don't turn out, we won't win much of anything. It doesn't come down to giving up one issue to win another. It comes down to showing up to win the things that matter.

HOW COULD OUTSIDE BARGAINING EFFORTS INFLUENCE BARGAINING THIS TIME AROUND (FOR EXAMPLE, COLUMBIA, U OF I, AND TEACHERS IN WV)?

It is hard to say for sure, but all of the wins unions have been having around the country lately should hopefully inspire our membership to show up and win some things too.