



the union news



the newsletter of GSEU and Local 2110/UAW

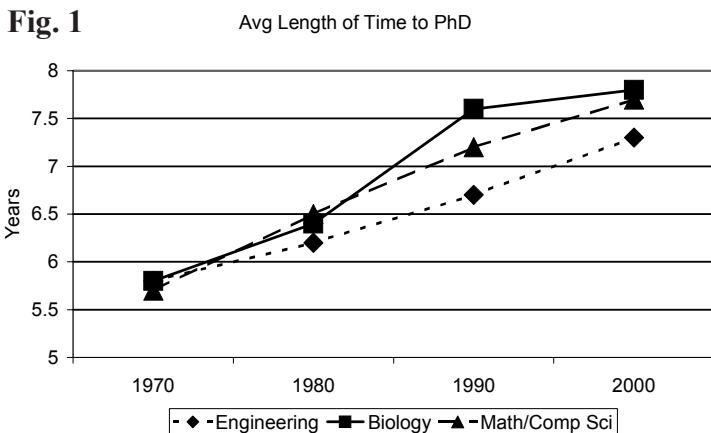
CAUGHT IN THE MAZE: CAREER CRISIS IN THE SCIENCES

The growing movement of graduate employee unionization has successfully raised awareness of academic labor issues across many university campuses. But, until recently, a large part of the attention has been devoted to teaching assistants. However, the plight of research assistants in the sciences is now emerging as a growing concern for the entire academic community.

Low pay and long hours have traditionally been the standard for science graduates. Most graduate researchers in the sciences work year round, 50-60 hour work weeks, and annual wages for these researchers translate to \$12-\$15 an hour. Frequently, science graduates quietly submit to these conditions as part and parcel of earning a PhD, hoping for better prospects after graduate school. Sadly, though, career prospects after graduate school continue to worsen.

Compounding the low wages and heavy workloads is the increasing duration of science graduate programs.

Over the last 30 years, the average length of time to earn a PhD in the sciences has



Members of GSEU and GSOC (from NYU) braved a winter storm to join Yale's unions on their picket line on March 6.

STRIKE AT YALE!

Ten years of labor peace. That's what Yale University hopes to buy with its latest contract offer.

On March 3, clerical and maintenance workers on campus, who are members of HERE (Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees), walked out for

a one-week strike. They were joined by the teaching assistants of GESO (Graduate Employee and Student Orga-

nization), who have been working since the early 1990s to organize a union. Their joint effort marked the eighth strike at Yale since 1968, by far the worst labor relations record of

any Ivy League university - and possibly of any university in the country.

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The UAW Speaks Out for Jailed Union Organizers in China

UPenn Votes Union Yes!

The World Bank Studies the Effects of Unionization

Plus: More Graphs!

increased by up to 2 years.¹ Figure 1 shows the average increase in PhD program duration for Engineering fields, the Life Sciences, and Math/Computer Science. Graduate programs take longer, meaning that even as many graduate researchers start families, they continue to receive low wages.

(continued inside)

Strong Union = Strong Economy: The World Bank's New Equation

True or false: union organizing is bad for the economy? Conservative economists like to claim that if people have a say in their wages and working conditions, they will hopelessly tangle with market mechanisms, ultimately lowering economic growth.

Not so, says the World Bank. In a report issued early this year, World Bank economists found that there is no evidence that union organizing has any

negative effect on overall economic growth. In fact, “if unions are powerful and the government is left-wing, economic performance can be predicted to be ‘good.’”

Perhaps most important, the study corrected the common misconception that high rates of unionization lead to high rates of unemployment (by raising wages beyond what employers will pay). On the contrary, the World Bank found that countries in which strong unions

bargain with employers’ associations have steady economic growth, no sign of increased unemployment, and less economic inequality than countries with low rates of unionization.

The World Bank study also showed that aside from overall economic growth, from an individual worker’s point of view, it’s good to be union. Unionized workers earn more than non-union workers and are more likely to receive fringe ben-

efits. People working in union shops work fewer hours and are more likely to be paid for overtime. Perhaps for these reasons, they are less likely to quit their jobs. At the same time, unionized shops adopt new technologies as rapidly as non-union ones, and unionized workers are more likely to receive extra training on the job. Productivity in union shops also rises as quickly as in non-union companies.

The UAW Reaches Out to Union Organizers in China

Liaoyang. On March 11th and 12th 2002, Yao Fuxin lead a protest of 2,000 Ferroalloy factory workers and 15,000 workers from five other Liaoyang factories demanding fair compensation from the local government. The Liaoyang city government had withheld a full year’s wages from the workers.

On March 17, 2002, Yao was secretly detained, three days later Xiao was picked up by local police. After a year in prison the men went to trial in January facing charges of subversion, and could face the death penalty. Since then there have been massive protests in the Liaoyang province, including a mass walkout of over 40,000 factory workers. *Chinese Labor Bulletin* stated, “the Liaoyang government’s secret detention of workers’ leaders is despicable and unacceptable behavior. Their

This past January, UAW President Ron Gettelfinger wrote to then-Chinese President Jiang Zemin calling for him to release imprisoned labor activists Yao Fuxin and Xiao Yunliang.

Yao and Xiao were arrested on charges of attempting to subvert the Chinese government in March of 2002. The two men had been leading a series of demonstrations over the previous year protesting the closing of the Ferroalloy plant in the city of

UNION YES! WAR NO!

Dozens of GSEU members joined the UAW at the anti-war march on March 22.



actions do not only destroy any vestige of trust by the people, but also lay the groundwork for future trouble.”

UAW President Ron Gettelfinger wrote to President Jiang Zemin “on behalf of the 1.3 million active and retired members of the UAW,” including hundreds

of Chinese graduate employees represented by the UAW at UCLA, UC-Berkley and NYU. In his letter, Gettelfinger asserts, “A review of the facts in this case indicates that all charges against these two should be dropped immediately and those detained should be freed unconditionally.”

Career Crisis in the Sciences, continued from front page

The long, often grueling, crucible of graduate school would be easier to bear if prospects for lucrative industry jobs or tenured faculty positions were promising. Unfortunately, both are elusive. Figure 2 shows the increasing number of new PhD recipients in the Engineering, Life Science, and Math/Computer Science fields. Over the past 20 years, the number of people earning PhDs in these fields has increased, and a growing number of them have earned positions in industry. Yet, the number of PhDs starting careers in industry remains small compared to the total number of PhDs entering the job market.

If newly minted science PhDs are not going into industry, where are they ending up? The answer is, most are following the well-worn path that so many other PhDs have been forced to take: the life of an academic postdoc.

Historically, a post-doctoral appointment, or post-doc, was a short-term, temporary position for advanced training often leading to a tenure track faculty appointment. Today, the postdoc has become a long-term, low wage career for the bulk of the scientific workforce. Associate Dean of the Johns Hopkins Medical School Levi Watkins, Jr. stated, "Postdocs, overall, are the most important element of this academic environment."²

Regrettably, for most postdocs, there is no tenure track position waiting at the end of the road. As figure 3 shows, the number of academic postdoc positions has steadily risen, while the number of tenure-track, junior faculty positions has

decreased. Furthermore, the increasing number of postdocs has made competition for those few junior faculty positions particularly fierce.

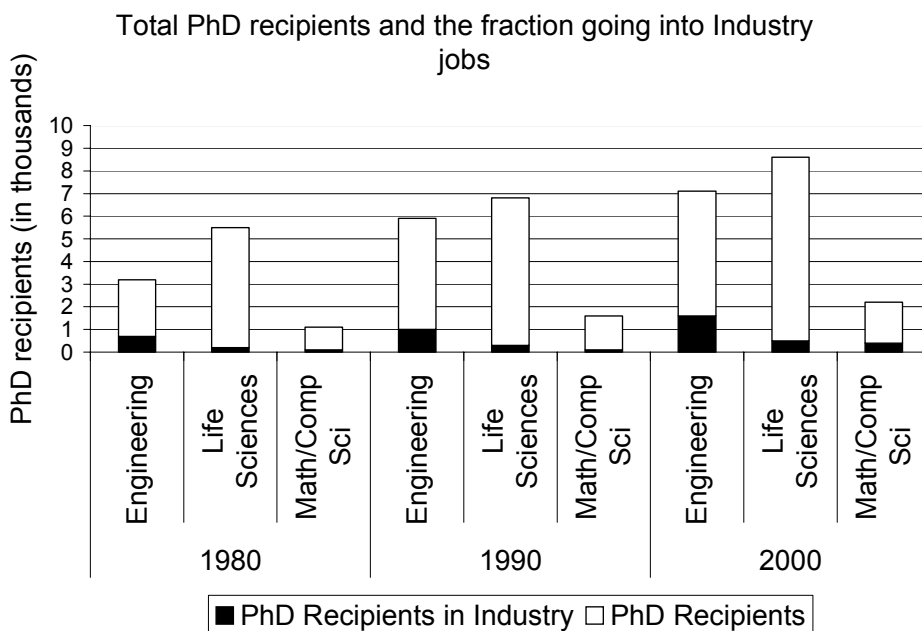
Why have postdocs shifted from short-term traineeships to long-term career positions? As Prof. Donald Brown of the Carnegie Institution said in the journal *Science*, (285:1519, 1999) "What's the most economical way to fund high-quality research? There's no question that you get the biggest bang for your buck by using postdocs."

For PhDs who survive graduate school and

move on to either an academic or industrial postdoc, the financial outcomes are woeful. As reported in *Science* (294:399-401, 2001) the median salary for an academic postdoc is \$31,000; an industry postdoc is slightly better at \$36,000. Consider also that most postdocs are in their thirties, 66% are married, 37% have children, and they all routinely work 50-60 hour workweeks with minimal benefits.³

Industry is no longer a safe haven for recent PhDs. Industries that once provided high-paying, secure jobs are now faced with growing numbers of science PhDs and have begun to follow the academy's example of underpaying temporary workers. And, things will only get worse: in 2001-2002, several of

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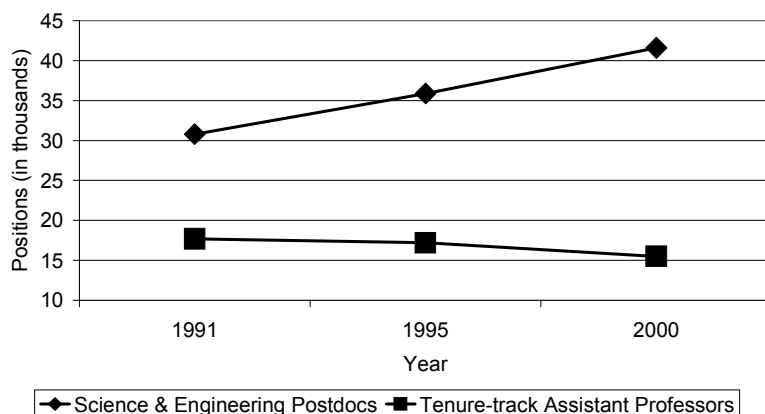
News Flash:

GRAD EMPLOYEES AT UPENN VOTE "UNION YES!": Last month, TAs and RAs at UPenn voted to unionize with GET-UP/AFT. Unfortunately, the official vote count is still unknown, as the Penn administration chose to imitate Columbia's bad example with an appeal to the NLRB. An NLRB decision on the case is pending, along with decisions on Columbia, Brown, and Tufts.

PRATT STUDENT EMPLOYEES PETITION FOR UNION ELECTION: Student employees at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn last week demanded that Pratt recognize their union, the Pratt Organization of Student Employees (POSE/UAW). The majority of Pratt's 900 student workers signed cards supporting the union.

Fig. 3

Growth in Postdoc positions versus tenure track faculty positions



Yale, from front page

In response to the strike --as well as to unflattering coverage in publications ranging from the New York to the Los Angeles Times-- Yale came out in late March with an unprecedented proposal for a ten-year contract. (Previous contracts expired after six years.)

John Wilhelm, President of HERE, has suggested that the unions are unlikely to accept Yale's latest offer. "We can't enter into a long-term agreement just based on the hope that the university will address the underlying relationship," he recently told the New York Times. "There has to be a commitment with teeth in it."

Whether or not HERE eventually agrees to the ten-year clause, though, the long-

term offer suggests that the employees' united front has made the university rethink business as usual.

Yale's current wage offer falls far short of the unions' demands. Yale wants to lock in annual raises of about 4% for the clerical staff, 3% for maintenance workers, while the unions' members say they need increases, respectively, of about 8.5 and 5.5% per year to catch up with other universities and to keep up with inflation.

The pension provisions leave room for improvement as well. According to HERE, under Yale's current proposal a clerical worker with thirty years of service would retire with a pension of less than \$1000 per month.

Perhaps most importantly, Yale's current offer ignores altogether one of the big-

gest labor issues on campus: the recognition of GESO and of a union drive by workers at Yale-New Haven Hospital.

In the early 1990s, GESO pioneered the national drive to establish the union rights of graduate employees at private universities. A decade later, Yale, like Columbia, still refuses to see teaching and research assistants as anything other than students. In an effort to avoid the years of delay that would characterize Yale's likely appeal of an NLRB election, GESO has proposed that Yale recognize the union as soon as a majority of teaching assistants have signed union cards. Yale has vowed to fight GESO's efforts, arguing --again, like Columbia-- that teaching assistants have no right to organize in the first place.

The union drive at

Yale-New Haven Hospital --led by District 1199 of the New England Health Care Employees Union-- has had a somewhat shorter timeline. But it has met with no less resistance from university higher-ups. This past fall, for instance, eight union activists were arrested by university police for distributing leaflets at the hospital.

Though the charges were eventually dropped, union supporters say the arrests were typical of Yale's overall strategy: expending resources to limit rather than affirm the democratic rights of its employees.

Such actions go a long way toward explaining why Yale leads the Ivy League in strike statistics. If Yale wants its decade of labor peace, it will have to learn to respect the rights of its workers.

Career Crisis in the Sciences, from inside

the major research universities that rely most heavily on post-doc labor --including Columbia-- lobbied hard to exempt themselves from complying with a 2001 Department of Labor wage standard that would increase the recommended pay of post-docs by almost \$10,000 per year.

The future for graduate researchers may seem bleak, yet there is hope. Around the country graduate researchers are organizing for a better future. Graduate re-

searchers first unionized at Oregon State University over 20 years ago. More recently, research assistants at Tufts University and here at Columbia have begun to unionize.

At Stanford University, a 2002 survey sponsored by their postdoc association reported that 70% of Stanford postdocs "would join a union today" or thought that joining a union "might work."

As academic jobs in the sciences become more and more scarce, contingent re-

searchers look to organizing, as adjunct faculty have done.

At NYU, the union of adjunct faculty is currently bargaining their first contract, to increase wages, provide healthcare and pensions, and improve job security. And just this month, adjuncts at the New School University petitioned for a union election as well.

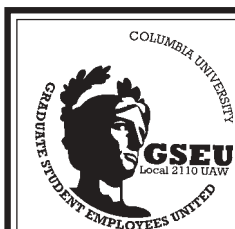
As one Columbia physics graduate researcher said, "Scientists are really in the same boat as PhDs in other fields. Without a union I don't

see how we can begin to reverse this trend."

¹ All statistics provided by the National Science Foundation WebCASPAR database.

² Joanne Cavanaugh, "The Postdoc's Plight" pg.54 Johns Hopkins Magazine (1999)

³ Committee on Science, Engineering and Public Policy. Enhancing the Postdoctoral Experience for Scientists and Engineers. Washington D.C.: National Academy Press, 2000.



If you would like to find out more about Graduate Student Employees United (GSEU/UAW), or to get involved, please call our office at (212) 749-6703, or email us at GSEU@2110uaw.org. You can also visit our website at www.2110uaw.org/gseu.

