

GESO: empty populist platitudes

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Recent failures to debate publicly the issue of graduate student unionization warrants a critical assessment of the ability of the Graduate Employees and Students Organization to represent graduate student needs and interests. As graduate students opposed to unionization, often loosely referenced as GASO, we have been more than willing to discuss unionization at an open community forum. We are not paid to advance our opinions and convictions. Why are we willing to speak when paid GESO employees are not?

Because GESO prefers protest politics instead of fair, reasoned debate. It is perfectly willing to march, protest, complain, badger and criticize, but it has refused to participate in a democratic open debate about unionization on this campus. This calls into serious question GESO's credentials to represent graduate students in a labor setting, as well as GESO's vacuous monopoly on democracy at Yale.

According to its Web site, GESO contends that if unionization comes to Yale, it will serve as the competent voice of graduate students at the bargaining table. Answering benign queries from an intended constituency, however, is a much easier task than sitting at the bargaining table opposite veteran labor negotiators. If GESO cannot or will not articulate its position in a friendly public forum, how will it be able to do so when the chips are down and a contract for teaching assistants is on the line?

Is it reasonable to believe GESO's promises of autonomy at the negotiating table when it cannot even attend a town meeting without its sponsors? The Graduate Student Assembly gave GESO the opportunity to prove itself. In refusing to stand the test of public enquiry, GESO has already failed us.

GESO also claims that a labor union is the only democratic means to achieve social justice for graduate students. But recent events suggest severe incongruity between this rhetoric and GESO's behavior.

First, in the purest democratic environment, every voice is heard. The GSA

attempted to achieve such an environment by providing a caffeine-free open town meeting for all members of the Yale community. GESO's refusal to participate spoiled the democratic aspirations of many for a rational discussion.

Secondly, GESO's unwillingness to participate signals a warning to all graduate students: When the times get tough and policies become controversial, don't expect your unionized "voice" to hear you. Instead, expect your unionized "voice" to hide behind flimsy excuses to avoid explaining itself.

As GESO will not discuss what unionization might look like at Yale, we are left to extrapolate from its latest actions, as well as examples provided by the labor scene at other campuses. GESO's recent decisions intimate that it will continue to assume your consent and speak for you without fostering a democratic or rational discussion, perhaps at the behest of its sponsors.

Dissenting opinions of all sorts owned by individual graduate students will fall upon deaf ears. For example, some graduate students at UC Berkeley are ashamed with their latest contract in which the United Auto Workers forced them to forfeit the ability to strike, in the interest of collecting more dues. And at UMass Amherst, the UAW forced an administratorship on the graduate union when it moved to form an independent UAW local. In short, GESO's claim that it serves the will of all graduate students is a rhetorical irony.

The bottom line is clear. By not participating in the GSA-sponsored town forum, GESO avoided answering the tough questions about unionization at Yale. It is time that graduate students received some answers after 10 long years of GESO protests, annoying phone calls, unwanted visits at labs and at home, and bullying coffee breaks.

Who will GESO include in the bargaining unit at Yale? How many hundreds of dollars a year will graduate student members pay in union dues? Who will represent graduate students at the bargaining table? How will the varying priorities in different departments be preserved by a single contract?

As doctoral students at an Ivy League university, we demand reasoned, public answers, not populist platitudes and picket signs. We don't find tired repetition of dubious arguments convincing. If GESO is unable to provide answers after a decade of futile organizing, doesn't this failure signal that an end to GESO is in sight?

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