

Chapter 11. This is What Solidarity Looks Like: A Model of Thick Solidarity at the University of Illinois

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In “Intergroup Solidarity and Collaboration in Higher Education Organizing and Bargaining in the United States,” Daniel Scott and Adrianna J. Kezar argue for the importance of intergroup solidarity and collaboration between academic labor unions to resist neoliberal market logics. They call on academic worker unions to “identify, document, and make visible these common interests—increasing job insecurity, outsourcing, reduction or stagnation in wages, eradication of benefits,” to build “intergroup solidarity and collaboration,” and to “devise more complex strategies involving members from multiple different positions” in order to take control from administrators who “are transforming higher education into an unrecognizable enterprise focused on generating profit rather than ensuring the public good” (Scott and Kezar 120).

On our campus, the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), the Graduate Employees’ Organization (GEO) and the Non-Tenure Faculty Coalition (NTFC) have worked over several years to build and maintain solidarity across our unions while challenging the corporatization of higher education, fighting the rampant abuse of academic labor, and building a university worthy of us, our work, and our students.

Following are stories of how GEO and NTFC worked together on our campus and, in so doing, further developed capacities for what Roseann Liu and Savannah Shange call “thick solidarity,” which is “based on a radical belief in the inherent value of each other’s lives despite not being able to fully understand or fully share in the experience of those lives” (190). As our stories demonstrate, working together isn’t always an easy process. Our unions have different goals and different resources. Thick solidarity is a messy process, but potential complications should not scare off potential academic employees from organizing widely on their campuses.

In fact, these complications foster “a thickness that can withstand the tension of critique, the pulling back and forth between that which we owe and that which we share” (Liu and Shange 196). By acknowledging—rather than pasting over—our differences, GEO and NTFC have built a strong collaborative connection that has led to power on our campus.

Disruption is Loud—And Silent

A video was taken of the interior of the UIUC English Building during the NTFC strike of 2016. It was taken at 8:30 in the morning on a Wednesday in April. In the video, you walk down a double-wide hallway with white industrial tiles. The camera pans right and left, revealing classroom doors swung wide open. No one is inside. No students, no instructors, no administrators. Not even you. You float disembodied through the four-story building where the only sound is the echoing footsteps of the unseen person recording this video. As non-tenure-track faculty members cancel their classes, graduate employees cancel or move their own off site.

As you draw near the double doors that lead to the outside, a sound emerges. You hear them. The chanting of hundreds of voices grows louder as you step out of the red brick and white stone building topped with twin low-rising domes and pineapple spires that is the English Building on the UIUC campus. The call of “NT” and response of “FC” can be heard from blocks away all day. The silence of the empty classrooms and offices behind you will be heard for years into a future through halls permanently affected by labor actions. These are the dual sounds of disruption that would not have been possible without the solidarity of other groups on campus like GEO.

NTFC went on strike twice in April 2016, an action that followed state educational labor board certification in 2014, more than a year of negotiations toward the union’s first collective-bargaining agreement, and various forms of escalation in the months preceding.¹ Leading up to and during the strike days, a key form NTFC’s activity took was occupation of the chancellor’s, provost’s, and president’s offices. Staging a few protestors in administrative spaces forces administrators and those with business in the building to walk past evidence of unrest on their way to their administrative tasks.

Injecting these issues into spaces often devoid of them thus serves both the direct purpose of agitation while also troubling the easy separation of union concerns and “official” business. NTFC has extended this practice, targeting key phone lines and email accounts. In a single afternoon, the provost’s phone lines became unavailable as NTFC members and their supporters flooded the system with a high volume of calls in a short time span. These strategies have been employed by both NTFC and GEO successfully. The goal was not to break the system but to inject union priorities into the ordinary flow of the administration’s day,



Figure 1. NTFC Poster.

1. For an account of NTFC’s formation, see Shawn Gilmore’s “Forming a Union: The Non-Tenure Faculty Coalition, Local 6546 at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.”

keeping them from shunting union issues to a far-flung corner of campus or to a windowless conference room buried within human resources.

Always Be Sharing

So much of the work necessary to win labor disputes is mostly invisible, the quiet sharing of resources, knowledge, and strategy behind the more explosive displays. At UIUC, both NTFC and GEO have high turnover rates, and with contract negotiations spaced out over three, four, or five years, many of the people who had developed a healthy rapport with administrators, even in an adversarial setting, had moved on, taking with them much of the knowledge about what works and doesn't in negotiations and in collective action. By the time GEO was ready to strike in 2018, there was no one left in the organization with institutional knowledge of the group's previous strike strategies. GEO had not been on strike since 2009, and almost all the members from that time had graduated and left the union.

Fortunately, GEO could rely on the experience of its union family members in NTFC. Two GEO members who had participated in the 2009 strike had graduated, been hired as contingent faculty members, helped form NTFC, and brought with them many of the strategies that were then used in NTFC's 2016 strike. Christina De Angelo, NTFC strike captain, developed a strike manual based on advice from affiliate organizations like AFT and IFT, months of assessing the best locations for action, and lessons learned as a GEO member while on strike in 2009.

With membership at 37 percent and only 40 days to plan a strike that normally takes months to prepare for, GEO gained a swift understanding from NTFC of both *where* and *how* to picket, protest, and occupy. For example, while NTFC focused on shutting down the English Building during their strike, because of GEO's larger size, they were able to build on NTFC's plan for picketing the English department by shutting down buildings across the *entire* main quad. When it came time for the GEO strike, NTFC donated to the GEO strike fund, which reimbursed GEO members for their lost wages, and supported the GEO by moving classes out of picketed buildings and joining picket lines just as GEO members had done in 2016 for NTFC. What NTFC brought to this collaboration in the 2016 and 2018 strikes was the institutional knowledge of strategy and planning that is necessary when organizing a group of employees who may be slow to awaken but sturdy in the face of adversity.

Not only were some of NTFC's officers former GEO members, but the unions held offices in the same non-university building, an easy walk from the west side



Figure 2. Christina De Angelo speaks into a microphone with a raised fist.

of the UIUC quadrangle and the main sites of the pickets. The physical proximity of the offices, as well as the easy access to each groups' people, materials, and planning spaces, meant that neither NTFC nor GEO had to go it alone but instead could rely on a variety of interlinked support mechanisms between the unions, which, in turn, helped NTFC and GEO coordinate with other labor groups. In practical terms, this interlinking involved sharing the effort of physically attaching signs to sticks and sharing space for the storage for signs, water-cooler drums, megaphones, rain gear, and the like, and it also meant sharing a central location to hold sensitive information and the numerous meetings necessary for every next step of escalation to and through strike days. The union members shared meals together, shared in the aches of mobilizing in the rain and snow, and processed the successes and failures together.

Since both unions negotiated against the same employer, and often the same individuals, the unions were able to compare notes not only on strategies but also on inconsistencies. Sometimes employers will use an excuse against one group, then completely reverse course against another. NTFC's lead negotiator, A. Kay Emmert, one of the authors of this chapter, had recently spent two years bargaining with the same employer representatives that GEO would be facing in 2018. The unions were able to share bargaining strategies, information about what did and didn't work to get the other side to move on their position, and personality assessments of the exact people they would be bargaining against.

The unions knew what would push administrators' buttons, what would catch them off guard, or put them at ease. NTFC and GEO were able to share advice about clarity of message and the building of your negotiator's reputation so that when the administration was given an out before escalation, they would believe the negotiator, and when the administration was delivered with an intention to strike, they believed that, too. The unions shared strategies over the theatrics of bargaining on the record, the advisability of alternative side-bar approaches that would allow both sides to talk more candidly, and how to respond when the other side tried to take advantage of being off the record. In comparing notes, the unions were able to identify how UIUC treated the two groups differently and how the power dynamic changed based on how the members of the two unions were perceived.

Respect Difference

Every group is going to have weaknesses and challenges, and that's where collaborating and solidarity are most necessary. While NTFC has longer institutional knowledge through longer-employed members, GEO as an organization has a much longer history of activism. GEO has always been able to turn out people quickly. NTFC benefited from this in 2016 when GEO was able to call day-of actions to support the negotiations, packing halls and flooding streets in emergency calls-to-action.

With NTFC representing just over 500 non-tenure-track faculty members on campus compared to the thousands of graduate employees in GEO, GEO showed up in numbers to fill out picket lines, marches, and rallies during NTFC's 2016 strike. Its members' performative outrage and willingness to make noise despite being in some of the most precarious positions on campus became an inspiration. As the longer-standing union made up of mostly younger activists, GEO's consistent presence protesting inequality and unfairness in many forms, the energy and spirit of rightness embodied in GEO, showed NTFC the true strength of collective action.

This spirit of challenging institutional oppression created quite a reputation for GEO of being made up of rabble-rousers, and UIUC often treated its members that way. In 2018, when GEO employed the same occupy actions that NTFC had used two years earlier, the first response graduate employees received came from the campus security department. Campus police ordered GEO members to vacate the president's office. The confrontation looked likely to lead to arrests. That is, until GEO called on its allies in NTFC. Shawn Gilmore, another author of this chapter who was then NTFC's president, along with many other faculty members both on and off the tenure track, showed up quickly to provide support, not so much in numbers but in political complication. The policy on evicting faculty from office buildings was not as clear as the policies on student demonstrations.

Shortly after this show of solidarity by faculty members, campus police returned, and there was a noticeable change in demeanor. The message was no longer, "get out or else," but was instead that the demonstrators could stay so long as they maintained certain restrictions, restrictions that GEO had already planned to abide by, such as not blocking the flow of traffic and not entering offices. NTFC helped GEO be taken more seriously within the very institutional power structures that rely on its members' marginalized labor. Just as NTFC could not have won in 2016 without the rowdy, disruptive power of allies, it was the occupation and other non-traditional actions that eventually won GEO's contract in 2018, and the success of these occupations relied on the political power of faculty members and graduate students working in solidarity.

One piece of advice that stems from this experience is to lean into the unique attributes of your group—don't hegemonize and try to make yourselves fit another's model if it doesn't fit. According to every metric in the field of organized labor, NTFC and GEO shouldn't have won in 2016 and 2018, but the unions capitalized on what each group was good at, and that embracing of difference made the unions unstoppable.



Figure 3. Striking graduate workers walk through campus.

Addressing COVID-19 in the Classroom

Strikes might be the most exciting part of these unions' shared story, but for both GEO and NTFC, solidarity is iterative—not isolated. The unions' partnership is maintained in shared workspaces and through everyday interaction to address common problems. The two unions' work together in the English department to influence COVID-19-related policies is a good example of the durability of the coalition and of the methods used to ensure continued communication and support.



Figure 4. Graduate workers rally before a bargaining session.

At the beginning of fall 2021, COVID-19 had already upended instruction at UIUC. While many instructors (and *every* administrator) hoped for a smooth transition back to pre-pandemic normalcy, the COVID-19 Delta variant shattered those plans. GEO and NTFC members returned to classrooms with locked doors, broken technology, and no personal protective equipment. While everyone in the English department agreed that these issues were a problem, the administration's response to addressing them was inadequate.

The English department at UIUC operates on a hierarchical model. The department is organized under the direction of a head who is appointed by the dean, instead of a chair elected by the department faculty. This structure gives the department head *wide latitude* to manage the department without consulting their workers. To be heard, department members would have to fight. This fight took several forms. It began with a demand letter that was drafted by graduate workers in the department and presented at the first department meeting of the semester. NTFC members immediately expressed their support in the meeting, not allowing the tenured faculty members to dismiss the concerns addressed in the letter. NTFC members also circulated a statement of support for the graduate student demands.

Other types of support were less overt. Historically, the English department has struggled with ensuring their instructors are informed about what's happening on campus. GEO and NTFC members have countered this dangerous and disempowering dynamic by creating informal networks through which to share information. This helps members of both unions to see the wider structural causes of issues they both have had. For example, both unions recently filed a grievance with university administration because of late payments and missing paychecks. The back-channel communication between NTFC and GEO allowed both unions to ascertain the extent of the payment delays and identify the cause of the problem before the administration ever reached out.

Conclusion

As providers of contingent labor, both graduate employees and non-tenure-track faculty members at UIUC had been trained to two conditions: first, that the avenues of shared governance were closed to them, and second, that if there's work to do in the trenches, they're the ones to do it. These workers were already used to getting their hands dirty; picking up a picket sign didn't feel so strange.

As Scott and Kezar point out, different types of academic workers are often siloed from each other. GEO and NTFC joining each other on their respective picket lines was an example of how “existing unions can play a crucial part in breaking down these silos by creating spaces of conversation across historically separated groups” (Scott and Kezar 101).

During the strikes at UIUC, at the end of each day, the picket lines would come together to hear the news from the bargaining table. Every day, until the last day of each of the strikes, the news was the same: the unions either had to continue to accept nothing or wake up tomorrow and keep fighting. To do nothing meant betraying so many of the principles the members hoped to model to their students. To do nothing was to admit the unions had no power, their members' work wasn't valued, and that change was really just a theory after all. The unions chose to fight. They won.

Academics bemoan the fall of academia to corporatization and to dwindling state funding. Many have studied the theory of democracy and grassroots efforts, but it was these unions' willingness to put the theory into practice that created change. They came together not to make all their concerns the same but to take turns standing behind one another and to lend voices and the sound of stomping feet to amplify each other's unique struggles. Through these narratives, we've described our enactment of thick solidarity, which “layers interpersonal empathy *with* historical analysis, political acumen, and a willingness to be led by those most directly impacted” (Liu and Shange 196). At its heart, “thick solidarity” is about showing up, and it pushes us to acknowledge and work with the “specificity, irreducibility, and incommensurability” of experiences of difference (Liu and Shange 190). In the case of our collaboration at UIUC, nothing was expected in return except the greater strengthening of collective action that contributes to the ever forward march toward better working conditions for all. That's what solidarity looks like.



Figure 5. Non-tenure track faculty walking picket lines.

Works Cited

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Figure 6. Chapter authors standing outside GEO office.