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Panel: Graduate Assistants, Unionization, and Negotiations - The UConn Perspective

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Graduate Assistant Unionization and Negotiations

The UConn Perspective

- Overview
 - History of Labor Organizing at UConn
- Factors that Contributed to GA Unionization
 - The UAW Organizing Drive
 - UConn's Decision to Remain Neutral
 - Outcome
- The Negotiations & Ultimate Agreement

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History of Labor Organizing at UConn

- 1975 State Employees Relations Act (SERA) enables faculty and professional staff at State Colleges & Universities to organize and collectively bargain directly with their Boards of Trustees
- In 1977 faculty and professional staff at UConn negotiate first contracts with the Board of Trustees
- 91% of full-time workforce at UConn is currently unionized

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Factors Contributing to GA Unionization

- **Health Insurance Changes** - GAs moved from self-insured employee health insurance plan to fully-insured student health plan with higher out-of-pocket costs
- **Spousal and Dependent Benefits** - Proposed elimination/reduction of subsidies for spousal and dependent health insurance
- **Fee Increases** - Increases in student fees not covered by the GA tuition waiver
- **Teaching Loads**- Increased teaching loads in few University departments
- **Lack of Appeal Process**- Inadequate grievance procedures for GAs to appeal decisions about workloads, time off requests, and allegations of discrimination and discriminatory harassment

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The UAW Organizing Drive

- **Fall 2013** Graduate Student Senate responds to adverse changes by passing a resolution that:
“The right of a graduate assistants to collectively bargain over terms and conditions of employment is the only viable recourse for ensuring the well-being of graduate assistants, the graduate school, and the University of Connecticut.”
- UAW begins card collection drive seeking to unionize UConn’s 2200 Graduate Research and Teaching Assistants
- GAs gain support from other campus unions including AAUP and UConn professionals as well as a number of elected officials
- **Spring 2014** - UAW requests that UConn Administration enter into a neutrality agreement

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University's Decision to Remain Neutral

- Connecticut's congressional delegation and all state constitutional officers signed letters endorsing the right of UConn GA's to unionize and urging the University to remain neutral
- Majority support for unionization was clear
- GA's status as "employees" for collective bargaining was unsettled
- Favorable labor board ruling or enabling legislation was likely
- NYU had recently entered a similar agreement with UAW
- UConn has a long history of strong and constructive relationships with labor unions that represent 91% of UConn's workforce

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The Neutrality Agreement

- UConn agrees that GA's are “employees” only for the purpose of collective bargaining under the state labor relations laws
- Academic matters are not subject to collective bargaining including:
 - Selection of who becomes a GA
 - Decisions regarding who is taught, what is taught, how it's taught and who does the teaching
 - Decisions around academic progress
 - Decisions regarding the establishment of tuition, fees, and charges of general application

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The Neutrality Agreement

- The parties agree that GA's are not covered by the state employee pension or healthcare
- Arbitration will not reach academic policy matters
- Majority status will be determined by “card check” and not a secret ballot election
- UConn's senior administration would not engage in efforts to influence a GA's choice as to unionization

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Outcome

- **April 17, 2014** - Connecticut State Board of Labor Relations certifies the GEU-UAW as the exclusive representative of UConn's teaching and research assistants after verifying signatures on authorization cards from over 70% of eligible GAs
- **June 2014** - GEU-UAW and UConn begin the process for negotiating a first contract
- **May 2015** - GEU-UAW and UConn reach a comprehensive collective bargaining agreement covering July 1, 2015 - June 30, 2018

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The Negotiations

- **Critical Issues in Bargaining**
 - Health Insurance
 - Fee Waivers
 - Workload
 - Leaves of Absence
 - Compensation for Summer Work
 - University Prerogatives and Academic Rights

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