



# HOW TO BUILD GRADUATE WORKER POWER

(and how to win union recognition along the way)

Northwestern University Graduate Workers

## NUGW Today

**NUGW**, as a large group of workers acting collectively to advocate for themselves and others on campus, currently fits the definition of a union! While not officially recognized by the university, over the last few years we have launched a new membership system, formalized our decision-making and operating procedures, created and filled seven elected officer positions, trained department organizers, revised our mission statement, led multiple actions in support of graduate workers struggling during a pandemic, and built coalitions with undergraduate organizations to abolish police, protect international students, and support vulnerable service workers.

Despite all of this growth, there's still work to be done. In order to win funding extensions, stronger protections against harassment, university policies that enshrine our anti-racist, feminist principles, and to generally have more control over our own workplace, we need to continue building our power. This document will walk you through the ins and outs of some of the possible paths we might take.

## Definitions

**NUGW** - Northwestern University Graduate Workers, an anti-racist, feminist labor union made up entirely of graduate students at Northwestern

**NLRB** - National Labor Relations Board, the federal agency tasked with enforcing U.S. labor law. This board is appointed by the President and as such, has had a strong anti-worker tilt over the past several years.

**Collective Bargaining Agreement** - Commonly referred to as a contract, this is the agreement between an employer and a union that governs workplace issues, including stipends, insurance, harassment protections, TA workloads, and much more. They are negotiated during a process known as "collective bargaining," and then sent to membership for ratification.

**Bargaining Unit** - The set of workers that is covered by the collective bargaining agreement, as decided upon by the union. These can range anywhere from TAs in one specific school, to "wall-to-wall" units that cover EVERY worker on campus. While we have not settled on a specific bargaining unit, we tend to think big and inclusive.

**Member card** - A petition or form signed by a worker stating their desire to be represented by the union that is collecting the card. For NUGW, our online membership form effectively serves as a member card.

## Minority Unionism Model

As a currently unrecognized union, we have not yet had the opportunity to bargain for a contract. However, that has not stopped us from advocating for the needs of grad workers on campus, and even winning several campaigns along the way. This model, known as **minority unionism**, recently gained a lot of press as workers at Google announced their minority union.

One of the struggles of existing as a minority union, particularly for grad unions where members have a high turnover rate, is maintaining institutional power. Many minority unions choose to implement a dues structure to raise funds for permanent paid organizers, legal representation, and other resources that help win campaigns.

## Voluntary Recognition

On the pathway to recognition, unions collect **member cards** to demonstrate support among employees. Our online membership form is effectively a type of member card, with the caveat that "official" cards expire after a given time period, whereas your membership in NUGW does not. A typical strategy for a union is that once a demonstrable majority of employees have taken out member cards, the union will approach the employer and ask for them to recognize the union. If the employer agrees, this is known as **voluntary recognition**.

Oftentimes, the word "voluntary" is not the best descriptor for an employer's acceptance of a union. In the case of grad unions across the country that have won voluntary recognition such as Georgetown and Brown, the administration still required a vote overseen by an independent third party, but not approval from the NLRB. At NYU, the path to "voluntary" recognition required a strike, multiple years of demonstrating majority support from students, and relentless advocacy on the part of faculty.

## NLRB Election

In the case where an employer does not agree to voluntarily recognize a union, the union can appeal to the **National Labor Relations Board** for an election. An NLRB election can be triggered by presenting member cards signed by 30% of the **bargaining unit**. Certification then requires a majority of votes cast by members of the bargaining unit to be in favor of union representation. Following certification, the employer is then legally required to bargain with the union and work out a **collective bargaining agreement**, also known as a contract.

For grad unions in particular, the NLRB route has been particularly fraught. Since the year 2000, the NLRB has switched its stance on whether grad workers count as employees three times. Most recently in 2019, the Trump-appointed NLRB proposed a rule change that would strip grad workers of their legal right to collectively bargain. As of January 2021, the rule change has not yet been approved, but the status is still up in the air as the board is still controlled by a majority of anti-worker Trump appointees.

## What do all of these paths have in common?

At the end of the day, a union is only as powerful as its members make it. A union with official recognition but a disinterested rank and file can make it to the bargaining table, but will find it hard to extract concessions from their employer. On the other hand, a union without official recognition but a powerful membership base willing to take radical action can score victories without ever sitting down to bargain. A formally recognized union combined with a strong and militant membership base can then leverage their power gained through direct actions when they sit down to bargain with their employer.

## Where do we go from here?

Over the past several years, NUGW has diligently gathered grad worker concerns and fought for change through letters and petitions sent to admin, staging a "sick-out" in Spring 2020, and attending open meetings with administrators in an unofficial capacity. While this has achieved modest success, we still have the long-term goal of securing union recognition and a collective bargaining agreement.

As we work towards that goal, we will continue to build up our institutional power. This includes continuing to strengthen our department organizer network, forming coalitions with student groups on campus, and raising funds for organizing resources. In the coming months, the union membership will vote on implementing a dues structure, the details of which are still being discussed. Depending on the outcome, it is possible that within a short time we will have the resources to hire paid organizers, maintain a strike fund, and much more.

## How can I help?

There are plenty of ways to get involved with our efforts! In this virtual world, most of our organizing happens on our Slack channel, which all members are encouraged to join. We have weekly organizing committee meetings that are open to all members, and several standing committees that each have specific focuses. If you're interested in joining a standing committee, you can indicate your interest here: <https://forms.gle/oeX7ZANzuTB6JDyD7>

## Resources

If you haven't already, fill out our membership form: <https://nugradworkers.org/become-a-member-of-nugw/>

Still have questions? Check out the FAQ on our website: <https://nugradworkers.org/faq/>

Find a recording of our Unions 101 event from last fall, as well as future political education events, here: <https://nugradworkers.org/resources/political-education-events/>

Interested in learning about how abolition and the grad labor movement are related? Here's a piece written by some of NUGW's own members: <https://truthout.org/articles/grad-workers-strike-shows-labor-why-it-must-become-abolitionist/>