

NUGW-UE International Grad Workers FAQ

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What is the union?

Northwestern University Graduate Workers - United Electrical Workers (NUGW-UE) is an organization of NU grad workers (TAs, RAs, Fellows, and others doing teaching, grading, or research at NU) fighting to improve our working conditions. For six years, NUGW has moved the university to act in the interest of grad workers and succeeded in campaigns like ending the international student technology fee in Fall 2018 and funding the 5th year summer quarter. United Electrical is a national union that works with graduate worker unions in schools across the United States, including at [MIT](#) and the [University of Chicago](#).

The main goal of the union is to bargain a labor contract with the university to guarantee improved working conditions. [Our platform](#) is:

1. Competitive pay through graduation day
2. Professional standards in labs and classrooms
3. Comprehensive healthcare
4. Support for international students
5. Power and protection in our workplace

As of October 2022, NUGW is engaged in a university-wide union drive. Together, we will sign up the vast majority of NU graduate workers on union authorization cards so that we can begin the official, legal process of having our union recognized and bargaining a contract with the university to improve our working conditions.

Is it legal for me to be involved with the union as an international grad worker?

International students have the same rights as US citizens to participate in union activity, and visa requirements in no way compromise your right to participate in a union that represents you in a US workplace. **The choice to join a union is protected under US federal law for all workers, regardless of nation of origin, current visa status, or whether you are a documented or undocumented worker in the country. These protections come from the [National Labor Relations Act](#).** The [US Department of State also clarifies](#) that regardless of visa status, all employees have the right to join a union and advocate for improvements in their working conditions. [You can read more about your labor rights as an international grad worker here.](#)

Why do I need a union as an international grad worker?

Of the approximately 3400 PhD students at Northwestern, 37% are international students. A significant portion of current NUGW members are international students, including several of our most active organizers. International students are a central part of the Northwestern graduate community and tend to be more dependent on university work opportunities and in more financially precarious positions. Additionally, international students often face these challenges with a limited amount of support from their research advisors and working groups. Demands that would improve conditions for international students are core to NUGW's work.

International student members of NUGW demand:

- Legal help for immigration and visa processing
- Tax info sessions and referrals available in multiple languages
- Equal work opportunities and OPT fee subsidies

What is the union authorization card you're asking me to sign in Fall 2022?

In October, we launched a university-wide campaign to [sign union authorization cards](#) to show that there is widespread support for a legally-recognized union at Northwestern. The goal of this campaign is to trigger a union election administered by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), the government agency that supervises union elections. Over 1300 grad workers across Northwestern signed cards on the first day of our campaign, including lots of international students.

We need as many grad workers to sign cards as possible, because without a strong majority, we can't move forward with having our union recognized, having an election, and bargaining a contract that secures competitive wages and equal protections for international students.

If I sign the union authorization card, does that mean I'm a member of the union? Do I have to pay dues?

Signing this card means that you support the union, but it doesn't make you a member of NUGW. In addition to signing a card, we encourage you to also join our union to stay updated about our work and get involved! You can [join NUGW at nugradworkers.org](http://nugradworkers.org).

Right now, only members of NUGW pay dues and those dues are completely voluntary. Signing a card does not mean that you will start paying dues. Once our union is legally-recognized and we've successfully bargained a contract, all members will begin to pay dues. These dues, however, will be far offset by the pay raises we bargain for. Dues are necessary to sustain ourselves as an organization that can keep fighting for material gains for grad workers at NU.

Will we go on strike? Will my visa be threatened if we strike?

Striking is not part of the current phase of our campaign—our focus is on signing as many union authorization cards as we can! As it currently stands, we have a clear pathway to union recognition that does not require us to strike.

Going forward, here are some important things to remember about striking:

- No one is forced to participate in a strike.
- Any decision to strike will be reached democratically, because our union is democratic.
- Striking is a last-resort measure that we'll only consider if the university refuses to honor our legally-binding bargaining agreements.

Like participating in a union, going on strike as part of a concerted effort to address unfair working conditions is a legally protected activity for private sector employees in Illinois, including international or undocumented workers. Thousands of international student workers across the United States have participated in strikes and been otherwise active in their unions for more than 40 years.

At other universities, administration-led anti-strike campaigns have targeted international students because they know that international graduate workers believe that their visa status makes them more vulnerable. However, international grad workers have incredible leverage at universities. Although international grad workers are told that they are vulnerable, the truth is that they provide highly skilled labor in labs and in classrooms—labor that cannot be replaced. Any attempt by NU to intimidate graduate workers with the threat of revoking visas would send shock waves through NU's international recruitment and compromise the millions of dollars in tuition money they receive from international students each year.

As mentioned, we will only call for a strike that's grounded in our united strength—one that involves hundreds of graduate workers. Our best protection is our unity and our numbers. We

won't strike unless we are strong enough and we have lots of outside support. We won't strike in a way that exposes individual workers to risk.

How can I know more about/participate in the union?

1. **Sign a card.** First, if you haven't yet signed a union authorization card, [you can join over 1300 of us by signing your card here](#). You can also send this link to three friends and ask them to sign too! Remember, you don't need to be a member of the union already to sign a card.
2. **Visit our website.** Please visit NUGW-UE's [website](#) to get more in-depth information for what we are fighting for and why. Some important links:
[About the platform](#)
[General FAQ](#)
[International Student Rights](#)
[Why other grad workers want to unionize!](#)
3. **Join NUGW as a member:** If you want to get updates about what's going on with the union, please [sign-up here](#).
4. **Join the international student working group.** NUGW has a working group dedicated to issues concerning international students. If you want to get more involved in international student organizing, you may join the working group through [the Working Group sign up form](#).
5. **Becoming a Department Organizer.** Once you join NUGW as a member, you can become one of over 100 department organizers across campus to help us grow our strength. Sign up on [the Department Organizer Form here](#).