

## **I'm Neutral on Graduate Student Unionization**

by Bill Menke, September 2016

The National Labor Relations Board recently overturned a 2004 decision that prohibited graduate student unions, making way for them. Graduate students at Columbia University are currently considering whether or not to organize as a local of the United Auto Workers.

Labor unions have had a substantial impact on a wide variety of matters experienced by workers in the United States, including working conditions, pay, benefits and access to employment. People's opinions on that impact is mixed; a 2009 Gallup poll estimated about half of Americans believed that labor unions, on balance, help the U.S. economy and about two-thirds believe, on balance, that they help workers who are members of unions<sup>1</sup>. The rest hold the contrary opinions. Rather than take sides or speculate on who is correct, I merely point out that the impacts are complicated enough that people have formed a range of opinions.

I think that the experience of graduate students at unionized and nonunionized universities elsewhere in the United States indicates that benefit and detriment is likely to be bounded; unionization is not likely to lead to either paradise or apocalypse. Nevertheless, I think that the unionization will have significant consequences and that different students will experience benefit and detriment to different degrees, depending on their individual circumstances. Because graduate students are the people likely to be most affected by unionization, they too are the people who must decide whether to become unionized or not. They should be left to make the choice without other interested parties offering unsolicited advice.

Continuing the stand<sup>2</sup> that I took during the 2002 movement, I remain neutral on the issue of graduate student unionization. My advice to graduate students is simply, Do what you think best.

<sup>1</sup>Saad, L. (2009), Labor Unions See Sharp Slide in U.S. Public Support, Gallop, [www.gallup.com/poll/122744/labor-unions-sharp-slide-public-support.aspx#2](http://www.gallup.com/poll/122744/labor-unions-sharp-slide-public-support.aspx#2)

<sup>2</sup>Menke (2002), [http://www.ideo.columbia.edu/users/menke/talks/unionization/union\\_6.html](http://www.ideo.columbia.edu/users/menke/talks/unionization/union_6.html)