

Andrew Yale, English, University of Chicago

Candidate Biography

BA, UC Berkeley, 2001
MA, University of Chicago, 2007

I have been organizing with Graduate Students United – the grad student labor union – at the University of Chicago since the fall of 2007. From spring 2008 through spring 2009, I served on the UChicago Provost’s Graduate Teaching Committee. The committee’s recommendations in the fall of 2008, all of which were accepted by the Provost, doubled TA pay and significantly raised the pay of every salaried grad student teacher.

Subsequently, in the 08-09 academic year, I served on a subcommittee that assessed and recommended changes to the ways in which UChicago trains grad student teachers.

In fall 2008 I helped to organize student resistance, in coordination with faculty, to the new Milton Friedman Institute at UChicago. Faculty and student opponents argued that the secretive way in which it was created, the large amount of university resources committed to it (at the expense of other scholarly initiatives), and the administration’s authoritarian response to organized criticism abrogated standard principles of academic freedom and shared governance. My role was to organize a roundtable faculty debate on the Institute, with presentations from proponents and opponents; interest was great, as evidenced by the 250 students and faculty who attended. What resulted was a heated, though civil public discussion.

As a representative of GSU, I attended the AAUP Summer Institute in July 2009. I was subsequently asked to serve on an AAUP national committee that will examine the relationship between departmental and individual academic freedom. I have given panel presentations on grad student

unionization at the American Studies Association, the 2010 Institute of Working Class History May Day conference, and a symposium on the labor movement organized by the Platypus Affiliated Society. As for scholarship, my dissertation research addresses varieties of vernacular modernism in US poetry, cinema and object cultures.

Candidate Statement

Prospects for grad students in the American university system have become rather bleak. Young scholars wishing to pursue an academic career can anticipate subjecting themselves to a sort of professionalized entrepreneurialism. There’s a lot to be said for taking personal responsibility, cultivating habits of professional survival, and “diversifying” one’s scholarly and professional skills. However, on its own such an approach misses the systemic, structural constraints within which individual scholars flounder or flourish, namely the structural shift in academia over the last several decades toward precarious labor in the form of a massive increase in non-tenure-track employment—in the natural sciences, social sciences and humanities alike. Labor organizing among grad students and faculty is the principal means by which job security can start to be restored to the academic workplace. Secure employment is a precondition of academic freedom, including the freedom to criticize and organize against university administrations that promote needlessly austere budgets at the expense of the academy’s presumed core mission of teaching and research. Grad students who organize become faculty who organize; from a certain perspective, union organizing is a form of professional development. Just as colleges and universities play an integral role in broader social and economic life by producing an educated workforce and producing knowledge, academic unionists should recognize that they are part of a broader movement of working people. Academic unions can play a vital role in combating social inequality through actions

in solidarity with other unions and social justice organizations. The AAUP's new RIR 14 is one essential means of recognizing and affirming the need for fair employment procedures for grad students; the organization's assertion of grad students' right to collective bargaining is an extension of its commitment to democratic shared governance. The AAUP, in the National Council and otherwise, engages and formulates policy that helps to ensure a viable future for scholar-teachers in all phases of their careers. Many of us attempt to inculcate in our students the democratic art of critical citizenship; it is just this sort of political aesthetic that academic unions seek to enact in our own workplaces.