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Graduate Employee Unions Protect Academic Freedom and Economic Security

*AAUP/AAUP-CBC Statement in Response to President Rawlings's October 27 Letter*

On October 27, 2016, Cornell University interim president Hunter Rawlings III issued a statement on graduate student union representation at Cornell. This statement is the typical anti-union propaganda that almost every employer issues when facing the prospect of a union election.

The statement starts out by asking whether unionization is in the best interest of graduate education at Cornell. This is the wrong question; framing the issue in this manner is a pretext to attack unionization of graduate student employees at Cornell. The real questions are these: Will graduate student employees be better off if they unionize? Will the university administration lose the right to unilaterally dictate terms and conditions of employment for graduate student employees?

The statement claims that many workers at Cornell are unionized, that Cornell has partnerships with these unions, and that this demonstrates Cornell's commitment to workers' rights and organized labor. But somehow that commitment disappears when it comes to graduate student employees. Rawlings claims that unionization will hurt shared governance, will put collective interests and the interest of an "external labor union" ahead of individual interests of students, and could negatively affect the quality of education received by graduate students because federal labor law does not draw a boundary between academics and employment.

In fact, there is no reason why shared governance cannot coexist with collective bargaining and the two do coexist at many institutions. Unionization serves to strengthen the collective voice of graduate employees and gives them a legal right to participate in decision making at the institutional level, providing input which makes universities better.

The fundamental reason for any group of employees to seek unionization is that there is a power imbalance between employers and employees that can only be addressed when employees act collectively. President Rawlings's letter acknowledges that issues raised by students have not been resolved, but offers to continue the status quo of collegial discussion rather than engage in what he calls adversarial bargaining. In fact, there is no inherent contradiction between individual rights and collective action. The rights that individual Americans have, including the right to free speech, are the result of collective action taken to secure them. The rights of individuals, in a world where certain individuals have more power

than others, can only exist when there is collective action to define these rights, which is also a fundamental lesson of the founding of the AAUP.

There is no reason for collective bargaining to affect the individual educational experiences of students at Cornell. What it will affect is their employment experience. Rawlings's letter raises the specter of an outside union unfamiliar with Cornell's mission and values seeking to promote its own agenda. In fact, most unions are democratic organizations, and their agendas reflect the views of the majority of their members.

In our experience, graduate students have no interest in limiting opportunities for learning or creativity. At other institutions where graduate student employees have unionized, collective bargaining has not limited the opportunities for students to receive a first class education, but it has limited the power of administrators to unilaterally determine or make changes to terms and conditions of employment.

The experience of graduate student employees in the public sector where they have the right to unionize suggests that unions are compatible with, and can in fact enhance, shared governance. Unions protect academic freedom and provide graduate students with an increased measure of economic security. Therefore, the AAUP and the AAUP-CBC wholeheartedly support the right of Cornell graduate student employees to unionize, and categorically reject the falsehoods promoted in Rawlings's October 27 letter.

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