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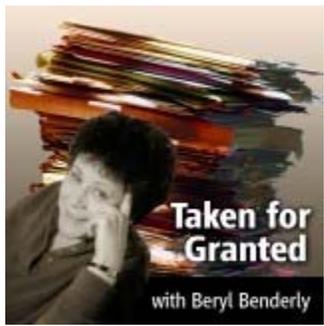
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"All they told us is that we have a majority. They did not give us an exact count." -- Matthew "Oki" O'Connor, union spokesperson and Berkeley postdoc

University of California Postdoc Union Wins Official Recognition

Beryl Lief Benderly
United States
29 August 2008

PRO/UAW, the union that tried and failed in 2006 to organize the postdocs on the 10 University of California (UC) campuses, has received official notification that it succeeded on its second try. On 19 August, the California Public Employment Relations Board (PERB) faxed a letter to the organizers stating that the union, known formally as Postdoctoral Researchers Organize/International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America, had submitted valid signatures from a majority of the approximately 5000 UC postdocs eligible to petition for union representation. Under state law, unionization is therefore automatic. The move brings an estimated 10% of U.S. postdocs into UAW, an AFL-CIO-affiliated national union that represents more than a million other members, including UC academic employees, such as graders, teaching assistants, and lecturers.

PERB's letter did not reveal the number of postdocs who signed. "All they told us is that we have a majority. They did not give us an exact count," says union spokesperson and UC Berkeley postdoc Matthew "Oki" O'Connor by phone. Judging by the nearly 4000 cards the union submitted, "I really don't think it was close," he adds. Postdocs who receive paychecks through the university, either through employment on professors' grants or fellowships that the university administers, were eligible to sign the cards and join the union. Those who receive their pay directly from grants or funders are not considered employees, were not eligible to sign, and are not considered part of the bargaining unit, O'Connor explains.

PREPARING FOR CONTRACT TALKS

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Once the union receives official certification documents in a week or two, O'Connor says, it will begin preparations for negotiating its first contract with the university. Postdocs will elect their negotiating team, with everyone eligible for union membership entitled to run and vote. Next, the postdocs will "democratically choose" issues for negotiation, O'Connor says. During the organizing drive, he explains, organizers conducted a short survey to learn which issues postdocs thought most important. Based on those results, the organizing team will develop a more detailed survey, then submit the priorities it produces to a vote. Negotiation experts from the national union will assist the team. One area of attention could be a UC postdoc pay scale that starts below the National Institutes of Health's recommended minimum and offers no cost-of-living adjustment to postdocs living in some of the nation's most expensive metropolitan areas. Another could be establishing a system of independent arbitration of disputes.

Once the union and the university have come to terms, the postdocs will vote on whether to ratify the contract. Only after ratification will the union begin collecting dues of 1.15% of income from postdocs who choose to join the union and a fee of about 0.9% from members of the bargaining unit who choose not to join, O'Connor says. Under state law, the contract will cover only the postdocs eligible for union membership--including those who are eligible but choose not to join. Whether the university might extend policies established under the contract to postdocs not formally covered by it remains to be seen.

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NO VISIBLE OPPOSITION

"Academic workers in California and elsewhere who have made the decision to join the UAW and bargain collectively with their employers have made significant economic gains and enhanced their working conditions. Postdocs at UC will now have the same opportunity," said UAW Secretary-Treasurer Elizabeth Bunn in a statement. She directs the union's Technical, Office and Professional organizing department, which, in addition to UC's academic employees, has organized those in the California State University system and the universities of Massachusetts and Washington.

At least a few UC postdocs oppose unionization--an approximate number isn't even known--but the 2008 unionization effort met no visible organized opposition.

The contract negotiated by the nation's first postdoc union, University Health Professionals, a local of the American Federation of Teachers, with the University of Connecticut Health Center in Farmington, significantly bettered UCHC postdocs' income, benefits, and workplace rights. Whether PRO/UAW can deliver improvements at UC, where postdocs already have benefits and work rights that rank among the nation's best, will be the acid test for the unionization effort.

Beryl Lieff Benderly has been a regular contributor to *Science Careers* since 2003, writing on postdoc matters and other scientific workforce issues. She writes from Washington, D.C.

Image (top): Kelly Krause

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