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## UNIVERSITY NEWS

### From GLO to TWLO: Four pivotal years for Brown student unions

*Unions discuss rise of organized labor, collaboration between groups*



Media by [Dana Richie](#) | The Brown Daily Herald

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In 2019, before the now-graduating class of seniors began their journey at Brown, it appeared that Stand Up for Graduate Student Employees — now the Graduate Labor Organization — was in danger of ending theirs.

The union had entered contract negotiations with the University in the spring. But a proposed National Labor Relations Board rule **threatened** to exclude graduate students from classification as employees. If passed before the two sides reached a collective bargaining agreement, the University would have “no further obligations to the union,” according to a 2018 agreement between the two parties.

With the proposed rule looming, leaders attempted to amp up pressure. But by February 2020, 10 months of negotiations had effectively reached a standstill.

“We had not made what we felt was significant progress on important key proposals like worker protections, on salary and things like that,” former GLO president Rithika Ramamurthy GS said. “It became really clear that we needed to do something big.”



Weeks later, the world ground to a halt at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. SUGSE made the biggest splash it could: In a socially distanced car rally, the organizers “circled Christina Paxon’s presidential mansion and laid on the horn for about two hours,” Ramamurthy said.

Soon after, SUGSE representatives received an email from administrators saying that “they would be down to do negotiations again,” Ramamurthy said. By June, SUGSE and the University reached a tentative contract agreement.

“The reputation we have now is a direct product of our insistence on being militant, our rank-and-file’s commitment to our participatory democracy and getting grads to talk to each other,” said Sherena Razeq GS, GLO’s current president.

Four years after GLO’s first collective bargaining agreement, a handful of undergraduate student labor organizations have followed in its footsteps. Undergraduate computer science teaching assistants **announced** plans to unionize at the end of 2022, with GLO providing legal and procedural support.

“If GLO didn’t exist, we’d have no basis, no foundation,” said Yasmine Abdelaziz ’25, an organizer for the Teaching Assistant Labor Organization.

In March 2023, TALO **voted** to unionize, becoming the first undergraduate labor organization on campus and one of the first in the country. Soon after, the University voluntarily recognized the **Labor Organization of Community Coordinators** in October and the **Third World Labor Organization** — a union of Brown Center for Students of Color student workers — in February.

### **‘It felt like it really mattered’: Teaching Assistant Labor Organization**

When Ronnie Shashoua ’25 began her first stint as a computer science TA in fall 2022, her peers warned her that “you’re gonna sell your soul to the CS department.”

Her friends warned her of long hours and a challenging work-life balance. Many TAs told The Herald at the time that they worked more hours than their cap of 10 per week. The Department of Computer Science clearly outlined to TAs that they should not go over that cap, but many still felt obligated to do so to keep courses running smoothly, The Herald previously **reported**.

A group of TAs sent out an “informal” survey to their peers in spring 2023, which culminated in an **open letter** to the CS department. In that letter, they asked for more predictable hours, better pay and guarantees that course development work would not stretch into the academic year, among other requests. The letter ultimately led to discussions with the department heads, according to Swetabh Changkakoti ’24, The Herald’s former technology director.

But they also sought to organize by other methods. That summer, organizers began working on a mission statement for a union, he said. They held individual conversations with TAs across the department. Foreshadowing GLO’s role in the cascade of unions that soon appeared on campus, TALO organizers began working with GLO staff who provided guidance on the “path to organizing,” Abdelaziz said.

Starting in the fall, Changkakoti said that he and other organizers waited outside office hours and approached TAs to discuss what issues the union should prioritize. Both Shashoua and Abdelaziz became involved in early efforts to learn about CS TAs’ experiences to inform the bargaining process, with Abdelaziz joining TALO’s organizing committee.

After the University **declined** to voluntarily recognize the union in December 2022, organizers filed for an NLRB election. CS TAs overwhelmingly voted to unionize in March 2023, **forcing** the University to recognize the union.

The union’s interim contract with the University, effective for the 2023-24 school year, raised wages from \$15.50 to \$20 per hour for most CS TAs and granted an hour of paid sick leave for each 35 hours worked.

CS TAs said that TALO has empowered them to set boundaries and communicate with their employers.

“I think TALO facilitates an environment where people are more comfortable knowing that they can set boundaries for themselves and let their professors know or HTAs know that they’re being overworked or feeling stressed,” said Lisa Duan ’25, a former head teaching assistant for CSCI 1810: “Computational Molecular Biology.”

“I’m able to enforce boundaries with the professor I’m working with and I don’t feel like the course falls into my hands anymore,” Abdelaziz said.

Since the 2023-2024 contract took effect, Abdelaziz said they noticed that “people seem to be really happy with their working conditions.”

### **Another wave of undergraduate unions: LOCC and TWLO**

Brown’s Community Coordinators — residential assistants who live in dorms — announced plans to unionize when their position had existed for just over a year.

The Office of Residential Life underwent a series of changes in leadership and structure in spring 2022, over-hauling the Residential Peer Leader program in favor of the Community Coordinator position that nearly **doubled** the pay from the RPL program.

Normally, Vivian Miller ’24.5 said she supports student unionization efforts. But she thought this tack would be ineffective — and undermine the existing rapport between CCs and ResLife. She did not want to “sully” relationships between CCs and ResLife after the office had responded to student demands for better working conditions and pay previously in overhauling the RPL program.

ResLife, she said, had been “extremely generous towards a group of student workers who are often stubborn and a bit insolent.”

LOCC bargaining committee member Anna Ryu ’25 confirmed that an alum was involved in the early organizing of the union. Their presence was “empowering, especially during that really tense and sort of uncertain unstable time of getting ourselves together,” Ryu said.

Ryu noted that LOCC aims to represent the range of CC experiences, both good and bad. “Having that range of voices represented — I think that’s something that we’re trying to maintain and grow.”

The union also builds community for CCs, a group that is otherwise spread across campus, she said. She has also noticed increasing competitiveness for CC positions — to her, a sign that union advocacy makes the position more desirable.

Since February, the union has been **negotiating** its first contract with the University.

“I think because they’re still in the bargaining process. ... I haven’t really seen a drastic change,” said Elijah Dahunsi ’25, a community coordinator. “But perhaps in the future, there could be a change depending on the progress of the union’s bargaining.”

In February, workers at the Brown Center for Students of Color also announced plans to unionize. 73% of the center’s roughly 50 student workers voted in favor of forming the Third World Labor Organization in February, The Herald previously **reported**.

By forming the union, the student workers said they aimed to “protect the Center from censorship, defunding and depoliticization” and protect its employees’ freedom of expression, The Herald previously **reported**. The students announced their plans at a February Labor for Palestine rally organized by the Graduate Labor Organization.

Soon after, the University voluntarily recognized TWLO.

“Without ensuring freedom of speech in our contract, we are unable to do our jobs well and actually build meaningful relationships in conversations,” Ouyang said. “It’s really important that we stress that in our contract.”

Like TALO and GLO, TWLO and LOCC are affiliated with GLO — and in turn, the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals, an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers and the Rhode Island AFL-CIO.

### **Beyond bread, butter**

Labor organizations at Brown have also expanded the scope of their advocacy beyond traditional **bread-and-butter unionism** to broader social and political issues, including calling for the University to divest from companies linked to the Israeli government and weapons manufacturers.

GLO's **Palestine Solidarity Caucus**, founded in May 2021, serves as an organizational platform for pro-Palestine advocacy. Signaling event sponsorship with a "Labor for Palestine" banner, the caucus regularly sponsors and appears at events with the Brown Divest Coalition.

It has backed calls for the University to drop criminal charges against the 41 students arrested for trespassing in University Hall at a December pro-Palestine sit-in. It has also claimed that the union's campaign for divestment is "employment-related," a categorization that, if recognized by the National Labor Relations Board, would offer the protests additional protection under federal labor law, *The Herald* previously **reported**.

The University updated its FAQ on protests in March, noting that it expects "unions and their leaders" to abide by Brown's policies when protesting on "a political or other type of opinion on matters unrelated to their employment."

Shortly after, GLO filed an unfair labor practices complaint stating that the update was a "retaliatory threat of discipline."

"The union is a democratic vehicle," Ramamurthy said. "It is an institution that's supposed to bring as many people as possible to take a stand on these issues that are fundamentally ultimately related to the way that the University invests its money and where it makes its money."

Razek sees pro-Palestine protests as a necessary and important way to mobilize graduate students.

"Unions that have been powerful and successful and that have made like real waves ... are almost always exclusively unions that had broader political commitments and convictions," she said. "People want something to believe in and a vision that tethers together all that we're fighting for."

"Any legal labor law protections that we have, we leverage that power," she added.

Not all graduate union members agree with the union's official embrace of political advocacy.

One fifth-year PhD candidate, who asked to remain anonymous due to fear of speech-related revocation of their student visa, expressed skepticism about the graduate union's role in divestment-related protests on campus. It might stretch the definition of "work-related conditions" to sponsor events in which individual members should instead participate in their non-union capacity, she said.

"I don't think the union, in the capacity of it being a labor union, should be involved in issues that are not related to labor and employment," the student said.

"I do feel like more people should be involved in this political movement," she said, referencing divestment movements that have gripped college campuses since last fall. "I'm a little bit skeptical whether it's the union's job to do so."

For Changkakoti, the TALO organizer, union solidarity with broader social causes is a matter of "responsibility."

In December, the United Auto Workers union announced its support for a ceasefire in the war between Israel and Hamas.

"Labor doesn't have a neutral role in any of this. We hold power by helping the University run," he said. "Because of our work, we have material power, and we also have a responsibility to use that power for justice more broadly."

## Looking ahead

Since arriving at Brown in 2018, Razek has witnessed a “major shift” in GLO’s relationship with University administrators.

“They don’t have a monopoly and they don’t have the sole authority they used to exert,” she said.

When asked how the University’s engagement with GLO had changed in his time at Brown, Graduate School Executive Dean of Administration and Finance Ethan Bernstein wrote in an email to The Herald that the two parties had developed a “productive working relationship.”

“Through regular meetings, negotiation sessions, and working groups, the University has built a productive working relationship with GLO that is guided by a shared commitment to supporting graduate students across campus,” Bernstein wrote.

All the while, undergraduate and graduate workers have reported a change in their lives as a result of union advocacy.

For Ramamurthy, the “union difference” came not only in improved working conditions but in the skills and perspectives she developed during the bargaining process — one she described as “radicalizing.”

For GLO Political Director Michael Ziegler GS, it came in the form of increased wages. He began his PhD program in 2019, before GLO’s first contract. Then, the University offered him a stipend of \$31,000 per year. Two contract negotiations and more than six years later, Ziegler hopes to leave the University either next spring or the year after making at least \$18,000 more, depending on the year he departs.

“The job is a lot better than it used to be,” Razek said. “if you just want to reduce thinking down to what you can count in your pocket, it’s worth it.”

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### Ethan Schenker

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