

LABOR

# In the UAW, Rising Academic Worker Unionism Is Haunted By the Ghost of Walter Reuther

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George Meany (left) and Walter Reuther (right) in 1955.

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Things are looking up for student worker unionism. For decades, the legions of graduate and undergraduate teaching and research assistants whose labor is critical to the daily functioning of universities have fought to establish a basic claim: the work they do is, in fact, work—it's not just part of their education.

Now, it appears likely that the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) will rule later this year that these workers are in fact workers, and therefore entitled to union protections.

The decision would overturn the board's 2004 *Brown* decision, which declared that student workers at private universities were students, not workers, and therefore ineligible to unionize. (Student workers at public universities in several states have had collective bargaining rights for decades, while other states prohibit any public sector workers from unionizing.)

This would be a long-overdue step forward for workers' rights in academia. As university administrations model themselves more and more on corporations, and universities rely more and more on contingent labor, unions have become critically important for those in their employ.

Academic workers increasingly recognize this fact. Whether it's faculty at the City University of New York and the California State University system voting overwhelmingly to strike in protest of management intransigence, adjunct faculty joining unions in greater numbers, post-docs organizing, or student workers fighting the corporate university on multiple fronts, academic workers are challenging stereotypes of who belongs in a union, and providing a much-needed shot in the arm for a labor movement that needs all the wins it can get.

For their part, student workers at many private universities aren't waiting for the NLRB's decision to start organizing. Unionization campaigns are underway at schools like Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Cornell, the University of Chicago, and the New School.

They are seeking to join student workers at dozens of public universities and NYU, currently the only private university whose student workers are unionized. (Cornell's administration also recently agreed to a code of conduct for a union election for student workers, although it would only go into effect if the NLRB overturned the *Brown* decision.)

At the center of this flourish of organizing has been an unexpected player: the United Auto Workers (UAW).

The student worker union movement, which emerged in the early 1970s, traditionally made its institutional home in the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). In recent years, however, the UAW has branched out far beyond its industrial roots, pouring tremendous resources into organizing student workers.

After establishing beachheads in the multi-campus University of California and University of Massachusetts systems in the 1990s, the union brought student workers at the University of

Washington, the University of Connecticut, the California State University system, and NYU into its ranks.

Currently, over thirty thousand student workers are UAW members, and the union is supporting many of the new campaigns at private universities, including Brown, Columbia, Harvard, the New School, Tufts, and USC.

On the one hand, the UAW's strong commitment to organizing student workers has been a boon for all involved. The union, beleaguered by decades of decline as auto industry jobs disappeared or deunionized, has gotten a welcome injection of new, younger members.

Under-resourced, high-turnover student worker organizing efforts have also benefited from the financial and organizational infrastructure that comes from being affiliated with the UAW.

But the influx of student workers—who now comprise about 10 percent of the UAW's membership—has also created flashpoints of conflict. The manner in which those conflicts are resolved will determine the direction of academic unionism—and may even end up altering the UAW itself.

## Union politics

One recurring point of contention has been the union's role in politics. While the UAW leadership has tried to get student worker members to contribute to the union's political action fund and volunteer as phone bankers and precinct walkers for UAW-endorsed Democratic Party candidates, student worker activists have pushed their union to take a more expansive view of political action.

In recent years, UAW student workers have supported Occupy and Black Lives Matter, challenged budget austerity, fought for public higher education, opposed police brutality, promoted trans rights, and taken a more active role in showing solidarity with fellow campus unions.

None of this has happened with the blessing of Solidarity House (as the UAW's Detroit headquarters is known). Indeed, much of the new student worker activism has been spearheaded by members of Academic Workers for a Democratic Union (AWDU), a reform movement within many UAW student worker locals. (Full disclosure, I am a founding member of AWDU.)

Although the UAW leadership has generally taken a hands-off approach to student worker activism, they have intervened on occasion to quell student worker initiatives. The most recent conflict erupted over UAW student worker locals' support for the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement.

In December 2014, UAW Local 2865 members at the University of California voted overwhelmingly to endorse BDS. They were joined this past April by members at the University of Massachusetts (Local 2322) and NYU (Local 2110).

In December 2015, following an internal investigation, the UAW International Executive Board (IEB) nullified Local 2865's BDS resolution. While the board acknowledged the vote was conducted democratically, they held that the resolution would harm other UAW members working at BDS-targeted companies.

The local appealed the decision to the union's Public Review Board (PRB), backed by its sister locals at NYU, the University of Massachusetts, and the University of Washington, but the PRB upheld the IEB's edict.

Meanwhile, the NYU BDS vote was marred by local UAW leadership efforts to disqualify many strong supporters of the BDS resolution. NYU members went ahead with the vote, which was held in conjunction with a union steward and delegate election, and both the BDS resolution and BDS-supporting candidates won handily. At a subsequent local-wide meeting, however, local delegates invalidated the NYU election results. They are now under appeal.

More than just a question of unions' approach to politics, the battle over BDS highlights a problem student worker members have faced in their dealings with the UAW: union democracy.

While the details of the stories vary, student workers at several UAW-represented campuses over the years have had to contend with union attempts to control information flows, limit or discourage member initiatives, manipulate the democratic process, and more.

This has happened not only on broader political issues like the BDS resolutions, but also on core union issues of contract negotiation strategy and member recruitment. In each case, the goal has been to try to keep control of union functioning and decision-making firmly within a centralized chain of command.

Those in UAW leadership claim, not without justification, that as the duly elected representatives of the membership, it is their responsibility to decide key questions of union strategy and policy.

However, in their interactions with student worker unions, this sense of responsibility has too often manifested itself as a stubborn unwillingness to even engage with opposing viewpoints, preferring instead to use procedural maneuvers to stifle dissent.

The result has been a tense relationship between Solidarity House and many of its student worker locals

and member activists.

Frustrated at a perceived dismissiveness toward their concerns, some student worker activists have questioned the value of continuing their relationship with the UAW. Most, however, have taken a stay-and-fight approach, as exemplified by the rise of the AWDU movement.

Launched in 2010 at the University of California out of exasperation with the UAW's absence from campus organizing against higher education cutbacks, AWDU has since spread to other UAW student worker locals.

AWDU-allied leadership now holds office in Local 2865, heads the Graduate Student Organizing Committee (GSOC) at NYU (part of Local 2110), and forms influential caucuses at the University of Massachusetts and University of Washington. AWDU activists have also linked up with rank-and-file UAW reformers in groups like the Autoworkers Caravan.

## The specter of Reutherism

At one level, student workers' conflicts with the UAW International mirror the frictions between leaders and members in other unions. But they also entail a struggle with an ideology particular to the UAW: Reutherism.

Understanding this framework, and how it structures the union's operations, is crucial to understanding both why student workers are in the UAW to begin with and the challenges they face as they look to expand student worker unionism to private universities.

Taking its name from Walter Reuther, who served as UAW president from the late 1940s until his death in 1970, Reutherism is an ideology that blends, as Reuther biographer Nelson Lichtenstein put it, "the tactical approach of traditional business unionism with the political economy of liberal Keynesianism and the social vision of Western European social democracy."

Reutherism's sincere progressive thrust distinguishes it from the business unionism traditionally associated with parts of the Teamsters union or the building trades, for example. Reutherism is decidedly not "bread and butter" unionism.

To the contrary, Reuther himself was a visionary leader with big ideas for the future of the labor movement. "We are the vanguard in America," he proclaimed at the 1947 union convention, where he consolidated control over the UAW. "We are the architects of the future."

It was this forward-looking, social-justice-oriented impulse that built the UAW into one of the most important unions in the country in the postwar period.

Although Reuther was thwarted in his efforts to establish an expansive welfare state and German-style labor-management “co-determination” in industry, the UAW did manage to win an innovative set of wage and benefit policies that set the tone for industrial America and ensured a decent standard of living for broad segments of the US working class.

Politically, Reuther’s UAW was a fixture of postwar liberalism, playing a key role in supporting the Civil Rights Movement as well as ambitious (if unsuccessful) efforts to pull the Democratic Party in a more social-democratic direction.

But Reuther’s progressive vision also had a dark side.

By centralizing power in his hands, Reuther wiped out what had been one of the most vibrant internal union cultures in US labor history. While it’s important not to romanticize this vibrancy, which at times could get quite nasty, the internal struggles between Communists, Trotskyists, Socialists, liberals, and other shades of leftists in the UAW created an internal dynamism that helped drive the union’s explosive growth throughout much of the 1930s and 1940s.

When he quashed what he saw as dangerous, disloyal factionalism within the union, Reuther established what amounted to a one-party state—the single party being his Administration Caucus, a body that operates to this day.

Soon after rooting out opposition in the UAW, Reuther negotiated what was simultaneously one of US labor’s greatest accomplishments and the seed of its undoing. Known as the “Treaty of Detroit,” the 1950 contract between the UAW and General Motors set the terms for what became known as the “postwar bargain” between labor and capital.

Labor, for its part, received regular wage and benefit increases, along with job security. In exchange, labor recognized capital’s “right to manage.”

It abandoned efforts to develop the broader vision of workplace democracy for which Reuther once fought, and agreed to prevent disruptive strikes. As part of that bargain, UAW shop-floor representation dwindled, with labor-management disputes channeled into a centralized, bureaucratized grievance procedure.

This arrangement worked reasonably well for the UAW and its members for several decades. The rank-and-file’s standard of living continued to rise, and while the work itself was hard and full of drudgery,

the pay and benefits seemed to make it worth the sacrifice.

But the problems became apparent when the deal began to fray in the late 1960s. Speed-up, racial harassment, and petty shop-floor despotism took an increasing toll on autoworkers. The result was a rank-and-file rebellion that reverberated throughout the union.

From young white workers in Lordstown, Ohio chafing at the discipline imposed by the General Motors Assembly Division (GMAD) to African-American workers in and around Detroit organizing Revolutionary Union Movements (RUM) to protest both management racism and union leadership complicity, UAW members were signaling their unwillingness to accept management authority—and were challenging their union to respond.

Yet instead of addressing management speed-up and harassment, the UAW leadership tried to put an end to what they saw as anti-union disloyalty. It moved to quash the rebellions, by force if necessary. While not entirely successful in silencing rank-and-file unrest, the Administration Caucus did reassert its control over the union.

As the union's bigwigs were proving their mettle as agents of shop-floor discipline, the automakers were growing less interested in upholding their end of the bargain.

By the late 1970s, employers were using threats of foreign competition and bankruptcy to roll back many of the benefits that Reuther had negotiated, leading then-UAW president Douglas Fraser to complain of a "one-sided class war."

There was little Fraser could do at that point, though—the union's strategy was based on the idea that they were partners with management. Those who advocated for a more confrontational stance had been sidelined.

As the US auto industry restructured and membership hemorrhaged by more than half over the course of the 1980s, the UAW pursued a two-pronged strategy.

First, they doubled down on the partnership strategy, fully embracing management's "team concept" production systems and essentially institutionalizing concessionary bargaining. And second—and, for student workers, most importantly—the UAW branched out beyond the auto industry.

## **A troubled alliance**

At the same time the UAW and other industrial unions were declining, student workers were struggling to organize. While some had managed to get off the ground as independent organizations, this proved

hard to sustain over the long term.

A few early student worker unions, like those at the University of Wisconsin and University of Michigan, affiliated with the AFT. University of California student workers, however, were attracted to District 65, a union founded by Communists in the 1930s that boasted a proud activist history and a reputation for organizing workers that didn't fit the mold of traditional unionism.

Beset by financial difficulties, District 65 affiliated with the UAW in 1979, fully merging as the UAW's "Technical, Office, and Professional" (TOP) division in 1987.

The alliance of academics and autoworkers had been forged.

While the District 65/UAW merger was clearly motivated by material considerations, we can also see in it faint traces of Reutherism's broad social vision. With its academic organizing campaigns, the UAW invested considerable time and resources not only into expanding labor's ranks, but also expanding notions of who belongs in labor's ranks.

However, what has remained far more visible in the UAW's relations with its student worker members is Reutherism's culture of control. Just as it did with the variety of leftists that helped build the UAW in its early days, the Administration Caucus cleared away the dynamic internal life of District 65, replacing it with the UAW's regimented discipline.

Rebellious members at the University of California, for instance, were tolerated during the long years of organizing, striking, and political negotiating that culminated in union certification in 1999.

But within a few years, that militancy and member mobilization was gone, leaving the new Local 2865 a virtual shell organization, comprised of a small cadre of hyper-active leaders surrounded by a vast swath of alienated, inactive, or uninformed members.

The same scenario played out at other universities. While the levels of coercion and discipline that prevailed in the auto plants did not transfer to the campus, the secrecy, suspicion, and bureaucratic maneuvering certainly did.

This is what UAW student workers confronted in 2009 when University of California campuses erupted in protest against government retrenchment: a union that retained enough of its progressive past to see the promise of student worker organizing, but too ensnared in its timid, bureaucratic present to join, let alone promote, movements fighting for its members' most pressing issues. Far from a vanguard, the UAW leadership had made itself an obstacle.



Although they have made their fair share of mistakes and gone through their own internal struggles and splits, student workers in the AWDU movement have reshaped the terrain of academic unionism in recent years.

Their messier, more militant approach has translated into significant material gains for student workers at the bargaining table. And at an organizational level, it has revived, albeit on a smaller scale, some of the rich internal life that characterized the early UAW and District 65. This bodes well for the struggles ahead, particularly the fight to organize at private universities.

Yet the specter of Reutherism still looms large. For all the progress student workers have made in shaking up their locals, they remain a small part of a much larger union. More importantly, an ideology as deeply embedded as Reutherism does not simply fade away.

As weak as the UAW might be compared to its postwar heyday, its organizational culture is resilient. Absent significant rank-and-file mobilization in the auto plants, we cannot expect campus-based efforts alone to make a dent in that culture.

Solidarity House, even in this age of student worker victories, is still the house that Reuther built.

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