

Organizing the Research Foundation

Academic workers need a union for a voice on the job

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Last month Research Foundation employees at LaGuardia Community College won union representation – and they have reason to celebrate (see p. 3). About 500 CUNY Research Foundation (RF) workers have now organized with the PSC – but several thousand still have no union protections. Why should current PSC members care whether or not these workers have a union?

First, let's take a look at what the RF is and who works for it. Officially, the CUNY Research Foundation is an independent, private organization, separate from the City University of New York and not controlled by it in any way. In practice, the links between the two are countless and intimate, and it's sometimes hard to say where CUNY ends and the CUNY Research Foundation begins.

To give just a few examples:

- All undergraduate applications to CUNY are processed by RF employees.
- Staff in the office of CUNY's Dean for Academic Affairs get paychecks from the RF, but administer programs paid for with tax-levy funds.
- CUNY Chancellor Matthew Goldstein is chair of the RF's Board of Directors and exercises effective control over the Foundation.
- When Ninfa Segarra, a close political ally of then-Mayor Rudy Giuliani, was hired as the RF's only vice president, the appointment was announced by CUNY's Central Administration – not by the RF.

RESEARCH FUNDS

The RF's stated purpose is to administer the funds that pay for research and other grant-funded programs at CUNY. Many workers paid by the RF do fit this description, working directly on the grant-funded research projects of CUNY faculty. These RF employees may be either full- or part-time; many do not expect to work beyond the life of the grant, but others continue as RF employees from one grant cycle to the next.

Thousands of RF workers, however, have little to do with individual faculty research and have jobs that are hard to distinguish from those of CUNY employees. These include full-time workers in roles we would expect to be filled by Higher Education Officers: grant officers, counselors, admissions workers, application administrators. There are also part-time faculty working in academic departments and continuing education programs who may be paid one semester by CUNY and the next semester by the RF, yet continue to teach the same courses.

The shifting and often arbitrary dividing line between who is an RF employee and who is employed by CUNY can be a major source of instability and insecurity for academic workers. Being switched back and forth between the RF and CUNY payrolls can cost employees health and welfare benefits, retirement credit, vacation and sick

time – even while they continue to do exactly the same work.

One of many inequities is in paid office hours for adjuncts: a CUNY-hired adjunct with six teaching credits at one college gets paid for an additional hour for meeting students and other efforts (a right won in our last PSC contract); an RF-hired adjunct does not get paid for that office hour. PSC-organized workers at the RF get tuition remission to advance their college credits, while most non-union RF workers do not. In many ways, RF workers often do the same work as CUNY employees, but with less remuneration.

INFERIOR PAY

With inferior pay and benefits compared to their CUNY counterparts, it's clear why RF workers would want a union. But why should the PSC put resources into helping RF workers to organize?

First and foremost, because RF employees deserve a living wage, decent benefits, and fair treatment on the job. The fact that virtually all of them work *with* PSC members in some way, and many of them work *for* us, makes it partly our responsibility to see to it that their basic rights are protected. If the phrase "the University community" means anything, surely they deserve our support.

But supporting RF workers' efforts to unionize is not an act of charity: it is in every PSC member's self-interest. When part of the workforce is underpaid and underrepresented, it creates a gravitational pull downward on the salaries and rights of those of us already in the PSC.

"CUNY has been restructured, and the restructuring has been hidden in plain sight," comments PSC president Barbara Bowen. "There are now over 6,000 'invisible' faculty and staff working on CUNY campuses, and hundreds of thousands of 'invisible' students in the programs and courses they teach. If the PSC is to retain its power as the representative of the CUNY faculty and staff, then we must represent the *whole* instructional staff, however it is configured."

If HEOs and adjuncts in the PSC can be replaced by non-union RF employees who get lower wages, inferior benefits, and no rights to fair treatment, it puts their wages and working conditions on a shaky foundation. And when CUNY adjuncts are more subject to exploitation, full-time faculty

can expect their own pay and conditions to suffer: that is the clear story of the last three decades in US higher education. When the bottom layer of the workforce is standing on quicksand, everyone above them is headed for a fall.

For those of us who are principal investigators on grant-funded projects, a major source of frustration is the RF's lack of accountability. The RF usually takes a large cut from our grants, and most researchers feel it gives too little back. Because the RF is supposedly "private," it asserts that the public (that's you and me) have only limited

time – even while they continue to do exactly the same work.

SHADOW THE SHADOW UNIVERSITY

CUNY Research Foundation employees

over 5,000 people

Over 90% have no union protections at all. No salary schedules, no regular raises, no job security. Many do essentially the same work as CUNY employees, and can be switched back and forth between CUNY and RF lines.

In the community colleges: 2,000+ RF workers. Many work in programs serving the community, such as ESL classes, GED prep and welfare-to-work projects.

In the senior colleges: 3,000+ RF workers. Many work on research projects of individual faculty members.

RF workers at LaGuardia and the University Applications Processing Center have recently voted to join the PSC; about 70 at the RF's Central Office have been PSC members since 1973.

Continuing Ed. (paid by CUNY Research Foundation)

close to 1,000 people

In the 2002-2003 academic year, 98,000 continuing education students at CUNY were taught by faculty paid by the Research Foundation. Most have even worse conditions than continuing education faculty paid by CUNY, with no union protections whatsoever.

Neither the RF nor CUNY administration will say how many employees are in this category, but student numbers suggest it's close to 1,000 – and maybe more.

Continuing Ed. (paid by CUNY)

over 1,200 people

Continuing education teachers (CETs) are among the lowest-paid of CUNY's instructional staff. Most get no benefits and no sick days. No job security. All officially part-time, even those who work 30 hours/week in the same program.

Continuing education faculty teach three main types of courses:

- certificate programs (e.g., in various computer skills)
- non-credit CUNY remedial & language courses (e.g., CLIP, Bridge to College)
- general interest classes (e.g., photography)

CUNY central administration reports that 935 CETs work for CUNY, but this is a severe undercount. The actual number is over 1,200, and possibly far higher.

CUNY's part-time College Lab Techs

over 400 people

College Laboratory Technicians (CLTs) work in science and computer labs – and almost half of CUNY's 900 CLTs are now part-time. In Fall 2000, 43% of CLTs were part-time – but by Spring 2003 that had climbed to 48%. John Jay College employs 59 part-time CLTs, and just 8 full-timers.

CUNY's adjunct faculty

8,000 people

Since the 1980's, part-timers have become the majority of CUNY faculty. For thousands, adjuncting is their only source of income & does not provide a living wage. No job security, sub-standard health insurance, no disability insurance & cannot accumulate sick days.

About 3,000 adjuncts work in CUNY's community colleges, where they do most of the teaching. About 5,000 adjuncts work in CUNY's senior colleges, where they provide close to half of all instruction.

The PSC did not try to organize part-time faculty until 2000. Gains won in the current contract include a paid office hour and yearly appointments for those with qualifying service. As adjuncts win improvements, it becomes harder for CUNY to undercut full-time faculty by using adjuncts as cheap labor.



Behind the University in the public eye is a growing "shadow university," employing thousands of academics with low pay, no job security and few benefits. They teach a growing number of students at CUNY, particularly with the changes in remediation policy of the late 1990s.

By organizing CUNY workers who don't have a union, and by fighting for fair treatment for all, the PSC is working to shine a light on every part of CUNY's workforce.

rights to see how it spends its money, whom it hires or under what conditions. When Ninfa Segarra was hired by the RF, she was paid \$115,000 a year – yet almost never showed up for work.

NOT ACCOUNTABLE

The RF administers over \$300 million in grants each year. It refuses to disclose many of its financial dealings, and the interest and potential investment profits from RF grants are used as an unaccountable discretionary fund by CUNY's Central Administration. A strong union within the RF can demand that the Foundation become more transparent, less secretive and more accountable about how it spends its money and treats its workforce.

Because many of the people working on RF grants are part-time or temporary, given the nature of grants, the PSC will have to be creative in bargaining for their rights, taking the realities of their funding into account. For practical contract provisions that protect them as workers, we can look to unions such as the National Writers Union for examples. Options could include creating mechanisms to circulate names of workers coming off grant funding during the course of a year, giving some consideration to seniority, extending sick leave and annual leave from one grant cycle to the next, and extending health benefits beyond the grant period.

It would be an advantage for principal investigators to have access to a pool of people with experience in grants administration, in-

stead of leaving faculty members to search among whomever they happen to know. As a principal investigator who has worked with large grants for years, I know that having a good grants manager can be essential. Having someone who knows the ropes, who has learned how to get the RF to pay us the money from our grants in a complete and timely fashion, can make all the difference.

MORE STABLE

A more stable, experienced workforce and a more transparent RF would not only be useful to principal investigators – it could also help improve CUNY's reputation with major funding agencies.

For the many CUNY students, especially graduate students, who are employed on RF

lines, being a union member would mean improving their standard of living. It would also mean introducing them to unionized employment and expanding the base of higher education professionals who expect unions in their lives.

Better pay and benefits are not the only way that increased union consciousness can make higher education a better place to work. A unionized academic workforce helps to create a more collegial and supportive culture in our institutions.

A unionized RF will also mean a larger base from which to organize, lobby and exert pressure together for funding CUNY, creating more progressive policy at CUNY, and improving our salaries and working conditions. The PSC has become an increas-

ingly effective political force, to CUNY's benefit, and as a larger union we can be more effective still.

There are also broader reasons to support unionizing efforts at CUNY. The decline in the percentage of unionized workers in the US has been alarming. In 1965 it was 30%; today it has fallen to 13%. The weakness of unions has helped make it possible for right-wing political movements to win huge tax breaks for business, and to slash support for services such as public higher education.

CORPORATIONS

Stronger unions are essential to counter the domination of our country, and our university, by corporate priorities. To meet the

challenges of the future, such as the outsourcing of professional and intellectual jobs previously thought to be secure, we need unions – and our union at CUNY – to be as strong as possible.

As a community, CUNY will benefit from a fully unionized RF and CUNY workforce. Unions create better jobs and higher salaries, which mean less turnover and more institutional stability. We owe it to each other, and to the next generation, to make sure that jobs at CUNY help to create good standards of living, learning and working for all.

Unionizing the entire workforce at CUNY will mean a more secure future for each of us as individuals – and will also create a legacy we can be proud of.

Art for Shadow University: Adam Vanderhoof