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U. Chicago Undergrad Library Workers Unionize

by [Jennifer A. Dixon](#)

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U. Chicago student library workers rally at petition filing

Photo credit: Anna Wood

Undergraduate library workers at the University of Chicago (UC) have voted to unionize, forming the first union of its kind at a private U.S. university. The new Student Library Employees Union (SLEU) could represent up to 220 members, the majority of them undergraduates, and will negotiate with UC on wages, hours, and third-party legal representation. On May 7, 2017, a coalition of student workers in the UC libraries filed a petition for union recognition. The student library employees worked with local union Teamsters Local 743, which currently represents full-time library employees at UC, to file their petition with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). These employees work in many roles throughout UC's library system, including circulation, special collections, the stacks, and the maps collection. The vote on unionization took place from June 2 through June 8, with voting booths placed in several UC libraries. On June 8, the UC student union announced that over 80 percent of voters supported unionization and affiliation with Teamsters Local 743. Of the 93 student library employees who voted, 67 favored unionization while 13 voted against. Thirteen of the 93 votes were cast by graduate students and

have been challenged by the university due to potential overlap with the separate graduate student unionization process; SLEU discussions occurred at the same time as sometimes-contentious discussions concerning UC's Graduate Students United (GSU), which is seeking official union recognition from the university and the NLRB. Marielle Sainvilus, director of public affairs with UC, stated on behalf of the UC, "The university is reviewing the outcome, including the fact that only 30 percent of eligible students voted in favor of union representation.... The university deeply appreciates the contributions of students to the operation of the library and remains committed to providing students who work in the Library with good conditions and fair pay." Student worker Katie McPolin said in a statement, "Winning today's election brings the University of Chicago a step closer to being a democratic institution, where the administration's priorities will reflect the needs of students and staff instead of big-name donors."

WORKING FOR REPRESENTATION

According to Anjali Dhillon, a co-coordinator and media lead of the library worker unionization effort, discussions concerning unionization among student library employees began in November 2016 as a result of frustrations with working conditions and a perceived lack of representation. In January 2017, they assembled a core group of leaders and initiated an organized effort to unionize. The group worked throughout the spring to build relationships and to collect authorization cards calling for an election from approximately 50 percent of its potential bargaining unit before filing in May. The coalition reached out to student workers throughout campus in an effort to raise awareness and solicit feedback. The filing sought three primary changes: higher wages; increased transparency and flexibility with respect to scheduling; and legal third-party representation in workplace grievance procedures regarding cases of harassment, Title IX violations, and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) violations. The union will also negotiate for the use of an external arbitration process in cases of discrimination against student workers. A university-organized town hall on May 24 featured presentations from a panel of university administration representatives concerning the bargaining and unionization process. Employees of Teamsters Local 743 also attended and spoke with students. In addition, Teamsters Local 743 hosted its own town hall in late May.

HELPING STUDENT WORKERS SUCCEED

As Dhillon described it, many of these goals highlight the importance of library workers also maintaining their lives as students at UC. "Erratic schedules" and a lack of support, she explained, can make it difficult for students to live up to their academic potential. In a climate where student workers depend on their wages to handle the rising costs of a university education, she said, they "also deserve the right to negotiate for working conditions that'll make them happy individuals and better students." As McPolin wrote in a letter to UC newspaper the *Chicago Maroon*, because her wages are low she is "often forced to prioritize taking on extra hours at work over making space in [her] schedule to go to TA sessions and office hours for the

help [she needs] to be a successful student.” McPolin’s letter described an environment in which workers complained of being “unheard or willfully ignored” thanks to the current system’s bureaucracy, leading to a feeling that the university views student library workers as “expendable and insignificant.” Emily Drabinski, Coordinator of Library Instruction at Long Island University in Brooklyn, who has been active in [library worker unionization efforts](#) in New York, remarked of the Chicago students that “organizing together to form a bargaining unit in this environment is inspiring.... In the long term, the infrastructure of a bargaining unit will enable these students to bargain collectively to improve their wages and working conditions. That will require continued organizing efforts and huge commitments of time and effort, but it will be worth it, for these students and all the students who come after them.” The overall attitude toward unionization on the UC campus was “overwhelmingly positive,” said Dhillon, as the process is connected with a general movement for a “more democratic and accountable university administration.” She did note the presence of some resistance from the university, characterizing university-hosted town hall meetings and emails as presenting “misleading information and fearmongering.” Sainvilus emphasized to *LJ*, however, that the library values the contributions of its student employees and noted that for years, the university “has had positive and productive relationships with unions on campus that have represented skilled trades, clerical employees, and police among others.” Drabinski described union organization as key to empowering library employees against cuts to wages and benefits resulting from higher education budgets. She said of the lessons to take from SLEU’s efforts, “library professionals have often seen themselves as management—a union is for the clerical staff—but the truth is that we are not the ruling class, and we only stand to lose if we insist on standing alone.” The union organization of undergraduate library workers is so far unique—although undergraduate workers were recently declared eligible for unionization at George Washington University, Washington, DC, while there is an existing union of student dining service workers at Iowa’s Grinnell College. Dhillon opined that other student library employees at campuses across the United States may soon follow the example of the UC coalition, as its members are not “unique in wanting fair representation in the terms and conditions of employment.” As she told *LJ*, it “is in the self-interest of student workers across the country to protect their rights as employees, especially as there is a nation-wide trend of universities becoming increasingly corporatized and profit-maximizing institutions that necessitate cheap labor.”

labor relations

Student Library Employees Union

unionization

University of Chicago
