

By Brian D. Weitzner

I am a United Academic Worker

Nine days before my scheduled dissertation defense, my then-spouse and I split up. I was able to navigate this enormous life event and get through my defense with the support of a counselor, provided by my university's student health center. When my father received a chilling medical diagnosis, this resource again helped me cope. But shortly afterward, I was suddenly turned away from the counseling I had relied on. My adviser and I had decided that I would stay on for about a year as a postdoctoral researcher, which rendered me ineligible for these services. My experience is just one example of the poor working conditions awaiting postdocs—and why I've become involved in efforts to form a postdoc union at my university.

Like all the postdocs I know, I love my research. But we face significant day-to-day obstacles as we try to dedicate ourselves to science. At most universities, policies governing postdocs' working conditions and terms of employment are substandard or, more often, nonexistent. Our titles and employment arrangements vary, leaving us isolated and frequently at a loss when dealing with complicated human resources issues. Many of my fellow postdocs are thinking about starting families, and parental leave and child care policies are, for the most part, sadly lacking. Living with this constant anxiety can make it difficult—and in some scenarios impossible—to focus on our work.

I want to make it possible for us to start families when and how we want, to afford housing and other daily needs, and to obtain support when we struggle with the unexpected difficulties life throws at us. Most important, I want to ensure that in forging these policies, postdocs have a voice equal to that of the university administration. Forming a union, as our counterparts in the University of California system have illustrated, is the surest way to do this.

For the past 8 months, I have joined other postdocs to discuss unionization with our peers across the University of Washington (UW) campuses. I've heard some horror stories, confirming that we must demand better: a postdoc who lost benefits when they were awarded a prestigious fellowship, which changed their job title; another who resorted to driving his wife to Canada to deliver their baby after the university had denied them health insurance because of their international funding source; and more. These events, while upsetting, make me feel all the more committed to what we're working toward. And we've found



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that a majority of postdocs are in favor of unionizing. When other UW employees tried to unionize, administrators cast collective bargaining as a contentious approach that can harm the university. They also maintained that collective bargaining does not guarantee improvement and may result in “Bad Things,” such as job loss and union dues. I take these criticisms seriously, but I do not find them convincing. The postdocs at UW understand that the best way to ensure that our concerns are addressed is to have the power to shape the outcome. We recently filed paperwork with the state labor board, urging the members to administer an election among UW postdocs. If the majority votes in favor of unionization, the university

will be legally obligated to recognize us. We also delivered an open letter to university administrators asking them to respect the will of UW postdocs and, should they choose not to support our efforts, to engage in an open debate. If university administrations approach collective bargaining as an opportunity to work together, the resulting partnership can help universities become paradigms of well-managed, fair, and effective workplaces. It is in everyone's best interest that careers in academia and, more broadly, in science are realistic and appealing for more people. You can afford rent! You can have a family! You can report sexual harassment! Scientific excellence can only be achieved with talented, well-mentored people, and the changes we hope to bring about through our union will help attract and retain them. ■

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