

GEO Steward Handbook

**Graduate Employees Organization, IFT-AFT Local 3550
<http://www.umgeo.org> • umgeo@umich.edu • (734) 995-0221
330 East Liberty, Suite 3F
Ann Arbor, MI 48104**

Introduction

Through day-to-day communication and internal organizational building, stewards mobilize thousands of graduate employees to participate in GEO. Stewards continue to work in their departments to educate, agitate, and mobilize graduate employees to build the union and build workplace power. Stewards' commitment to the cause and their example of how to take one's ideals and turn them into action has produced real improvements in the lives of Michigan graduate employees.

Finding, listening, agitating, convincing, emboldening, training, acting, investigating, instigating, helping--these are the tasks that confront stewards. It's sometimes difficult, sometimes fun, sometimes tiring, and sometimes energizing, but it's always the most important job in the Union. **Stewards are the backbone of the union!**

This handbook will hopefully provide you with some guidelines for what it means to be a steward, what the role of stewards in the GEO is, and tips on how to be effective at building the organization.



Steward Job Description

A member-run, democratic union relies on having a strong Stewards' Council. Stewards build the union in the following ways:

1. **Sign up new members and communicate information about union events and happenings to current GEO members in your department.**
2. **Get members to become more active.** A good steward is one that recruits others to help her/him to get the job done. In large departments stewards recruit "organizers" or "co-stewards" to help with organizing in the department. Stewards recruit members to attend GEO events and get involved with GEO committees. Stewards should know what volunteer opportunities exist in the GEO. Also, stewards are responsible for finding their replacements. This is easy if you recruit people to help you along the way.
3. **Attend Stewards' Council meetings and Membership Meetings.** Important strategy and action planning take place at Stewards' Council meetings and Membership Meetings, so it is critical that stewards attend. Also, every summer and winter break make sure to attend the GEO planning retreat to have input in developing an organizing plan.
4. **Participate in organizing and running special events.** The strength of the GEO depends on successful membership drives, rallies, and actions. Membership drives include the annual "orientation" drive, as well as other drives during the academic year. Rallies and actions are planned by members of the Stewards' Council in coordination with the Coordinating Committee, and other union bodies.
5. **Know and Defend the Contract!** Members in your department should know that you are a resource as they encounter work-related problems or have questions about the contract. As someone "on the ground," you are also the person best positioned to become aware of potential contract violations in your department, even if other members do not realize their rights are being violated. At a minimum, as an educated steward, you can forward concerns and complaints to the Grievance Committee.
6. **Advocate for your members within the GEO!** Stewards hold department GEO meetings, and have regular conversations with members in their departments to identify their concerns, ask questions, and find out what's going on in the department. Stewards are responsible for helping members make this **their** union.
7. **Develop a GEO culture.** You can do this by organizing social events, maintaining a GEO bulletin board, having members post door cards, and passing out t-shirts and buttons.

Anatomy of the Organizing Conversation

The following steps describe a tried and true method to building an active, democratic, member-run union from the ground up. The union is built one person at a time. While not every conversation adheres to a set path, your conversations with graduate employees should include most of the following:

1. Introduction – catch the employee’s attention

- Introduce yourself as a fellow graduate student and identify yourself as a GEO representative. Make sure to catch their attention quickly so they are motivated to continue the conversation.
- Mention some catch words or phrases like: "we're fighting to win better health care and pay for grad employees," or "we're the ones who won the healthcare subsidy for grads," etc.
- Keep it short; we don't want to lose them right at the beginning before we even get to the issues.

2. Identifying Self Interest – LISTEN to the employee’s concerns

- Get to know the person you're talking with. Find out what issues are important to them. **This is the most important part of the conversation.**
- Ask questions. Topics can include their work, research, teaching, advisor, familiarity with GEO, why they're at U of I, spouse, kids, etc. Something to say: "If you had the power to change one thing in your department or at the University, what would it be?"
- Listen closely and remember what you hear so you can use it in your conversation and write it down later.
- Let them do most of the talking here. If you find yourself dominating the conversation, then something is wrong. These are their personal issues, not ours. For them, the issue might be something you don't expect or is different from your own. That's good! Find out about it.

3. Agitate on issues – turn personal problems in to collective issues

- Don't miss an opportunity to agitate on an issue. Each issue deserves a response. Make them angry about the issues they raised. Find out what they think it will take to win the things they want.
- Some things to say: "What do you think it's going to take to win these things?" "Why do you think the administration just doesn't listen to our concerns and make the changes we want?" "Who should be deciding our future? The administration or us?"
- Be sure people know that their issues are important.
- Be animated when responding to their issues. No one wants to talk to someone who doesn't seem like they are taking what's being said seriously.
- Expand their issues from being personal ones to problems more universally felt by all--giving them a feeling of inclusion or unity with the group ("Everyone" feels the same way). Share the GEO's vision of where we are going. This should be the climax of the conversation and should prepare you to ask for a commitment.

(continued on next page)

Worker Assessment Scale

Assessing our fellow graduate employees helps organizers have productive follow-up conversations.

1

Member who currently volunteers for GEO, taken on leadership or other responsibilities

2

Member who has attended GEO events or been involved in some way

3

Card signed member, not engaged at all

4

Potential member, contacted but not signed membership card yet

5

Anti-GEO and/or actively working against GEO or hostile

0

Not yet assessed

--Anatomy of the Organizing Conversation Continued--

4. Inoculation – dispel anti-union myths

- If he or she didn't bring up any questions or concerns during the conversation, take an opportunity to ask if they have a question for you. If not, make sure to leave a FAQ or fair share handout that they can read over. Common anti-union myths relate to dues, strikes, affiliates, etc. Make sure you know how to answer these questions.

5. Commitment – move the employee to action

- Build from where we were before we started organizing to what we've done so far to what we're doing now to the ultimate question of: "Does that sound like what we need to be doing?" And when they say "YES", then you have your opening to tell them how they can get involved. ("Great! Well, here's what everyone is doing...")
- Be ready to give examples of past GEO victories.
- Use some time-honored, still true, clichés like "we have power in numbers," "together we can win," etc.
- The goal is to give them the idea that organizing is the best and only way we have to increase pressure on the administration. We need to organize not only keep what we've won already, but to win even more in the future. The Union is the answer!
- Find a commitment that is appropriate for them: signing a membership card, tabling with you in the department, getting you a list or other information, distributing literature in the department for GEO, setting up meetings with other individuals in the department, volunteer night, etc.
- Convey that joining the union, attending an action, or getting involved is natural. You can say something like: "Earlier you said that you cared about healthcare. Well this is what everyone is doing to achieve that..." OR "Everyone is filling out their membership card--here, you can fill out yours."

6. Assessment and Follow-Up – keep the door open

- Take a minute after the conversation to write down their key issues and make an assessment. Is this person a potential member or anti-union? Is she a possible activist? Make sure either you or someone else properly follows up with this person.
- If he/she wants to think about it, then let them, but get the right to return. ("We should talk again sometime, I'll give you a call, o.k.?") And have good follow-up--don't let it end there.
- It often takes several contacts before a non-member will join, and several more before s/he becomes active. Good follow-up is key.

It's simple!

1. Introduce yourself
2. Listen to them and figure out their interests
3. Agitate on the issues they bring up
4. Address any anti-union myths or fears
5. Ask for a commitment
6. Assess and follow up

Starting from Scratch: Developing a Plan for your Department

- 1. Make a Plan.** Get a list of employees in your department from the GEO office and spend an hour developing a plan of action. Feel free to ask organizing staff or experienced stewards for help with this.
 - Identify members in your department that are likely to help you.
 - Identify tasks that need to get done (are you going to put flyers in mailboxes? Can they be part of a department phone tree? Do you need to research contact information?)
 - Identify priorities. What GEO events are upcoming? Are there individuals in your department who have never been spoken to about the union? How can we reach out to them?
- 2. Recruit organizers.** If there are members in your department you can start with them.
 - Recruiting a member to get active in the union is similar to signing up a new member. You can start by introducing yourself as the new steward and ask if he/she has any advice on how to build the GEO in the department. If possible take these ideas and ask him/her to help make it happen. Or you can identify an issue concern and think of a way that he/she can help on that specific issue.
 - Sometimes a member doesn't want to help with the tasks you have listed. You should actively listen to identify possible volunteer tasks.
- 3. Implement a plan for building 100% membership.**
 - Give people a small manageable task: can you spend an hour visiting offices with me? Can you help me call the department for this upcoming GEO event? Can you help look up phone numbers for people?
 - Whenever possible, recruit someone to an ongoing task: can you be part of the phone tree for GEO events? Will you help talk to 2 non-members per week?
 - Start small and build up. It takes a lot of time following up with volunteers and keeping them active, but it's important that the work gets done.
- 4. Build a GEO culture**
 - Attend department events or create department GEO events, spend a week getting all the members to post door cards, have an issues forum, organize social events, create a GEO bulletin board, pass out GEO t-shirts, etc.
 - Make an effort to get people to talk about the union on a regular basis with fellow graduate employees. Make sure to take every opportunity to empower and involve members in the union. Is there a steward election coming up? Well that's an opportunity to talk to people about what they want their union to do. This is a good way to overcome apathy.

Worker Activity Ladder

Most successful campaigns are built around a core of active workers who take ownership of the union and the campaign. Recruiting and developing activists is a critical component of an organizer's job. The following ladder shows a typical progression as workers become bolder and more seasoned union leaders:

Step 1: Has initial conversation

Step 2: Signs up for the union

Step 3. Attends a meeting.

Step 4. Recruits others to sign up or attend a meeting

Step 5. Passes out flyers; identifies union activity to co-workers and the employer

Step 6. Consistently works to help build the union in the workplace

Step 7. Defends the union to the employer

Step 8. Represents the union to the public

* Excerpted from "Organizing that Works: Tips for Union Leaders"

About GEO!

For more information about GEO, follow the links in the right sidebar

The Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO) is the labor union representing Graduate Student Instructors (GSIs) and Graduate Student Staff Assistants (GSSAs) at the [University of Michigan](#). GEO was founded in 1970 and we won our first contract in 1975, making GEO one of the oldest graduate employee unions in the United States.

GEO is an activist, democratic and volunteer-run organization where graduate employees come together to improve our wages and working conditions. The collective action of GEO members, organized as a union, is responsible for many of the concrete benefits that graduate employees now enjoy. Over the last 25 years, victories have included tuition waivers, health benefits, and child care waivers as well as a powerful grievance procedure to protect our rights, transparent hiring processes, and standard setting non-discrimination language. Graduate employees across the country look to GEO as an example of what can be accomplished when we work together.

GEO is Local 3550 of the [American Federation of Teachers](#) (AFT). GEO works closely with our state federation, [AFT-Michigan](#), to enforce and expand the collective bargaining rights of graduate employees on our campus and throughout the state. Through AFT, GEO is affiliated with the [American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organization](#) (AFL-CIO) and with the Alliance of Graduate Employee Locals (AGEL). We are also committed members of the [Coalition of Graduate Employee Locals](#) (CGEU).

Quick Facts about Graduate Employee Unions

- There are 34 campuses with unions of graduate employees in the US.
- These are: UW-Madison, U Michigan, U Oregon, U Florida, Florida A&M, U South Florida, UMass-Amherst, UC-Berkeley, UC-Irvine, UC-San Diego, UCLA, UC-Davis, UC-Riverside, UC-Santa Barbara, UC-Santa Cruz, SUNY-Buffalo, SUNY-Albany, SUNY-Stony Brook, SUNY-Geneseo, SUNY-Oswego, SUNY-Potsdam, UW-Milwaukee, UMass-Lowell, U Kansas, U Iowa, Wayne State, Oregon State, UMass-Boston, Temple, Michigan State, Rhode Island, Illinois-Urbana, Illinois-Chicago, Rutgers, and CUNY.
- There are 9 campuses where there is either an organizing campaign or a Union without bargaining rights: NYU, Yale, Brown, Columbia, U Pennsylvania, U Akron, Ohio State, U Maryland, and Kansas State.
- The oldest graduate employee union is the Teaching Assistants Association at UW-Madison, founded in 1969.
- The two institutions that grant the largest number of PhDs, UW-Madison and UC-Berkeley, have graduate employee unions.
- Graduate employee unions affiliate in the greatest numbers with the American Federation of Teachers, the United Auto Workers, and the Communication Workers of America. Some unions have also affiliated, either singly or jointly, with the American Association of University Professors, the National Education Association, and the United Electrical Workers
- Most graduate employee unions are stand-alone units, but some are part of either faculty (e.g., at Rutgers) or faculty and staff unions (e.g. at CUNY).
- The AFT, UIC-GEO's affiliated union, has 17 graduate employee locals, is involved in organizing on 3 additional campuses, and represents over 16,000 graduate employees.
- The National Labor Relations Board denied graduate employees at private universities the right to collective bargaining in 2004. This decision, based on a case brought forward by the administration of Brown

University, overturned a 1998 decision granting collective bargaining rights to graduate employees at private universities.

- State employee labor law grants graduate employees the right to collective bargaining in many states. In Illinois, graduate employees are covered by the Illinois Educational Labor Relations Act.
- UIC-GEO's affiliate Union, the AFT, led the efforts to change the IELRA in 2003 to grant collective bargaining rights to graduate employees.
- Prior to that, UIC-GEO's sister union at UIUC gained voluntary recognition from the Board of trustees, in 2002, and began bargaining its first contract in 2003.

Other resources

Stewards should make use of experienced stewards, staff, and Steering Committee members to find out more. You can also use the GEO website as a resource. Here are some important links:

American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations: www.afl-cio.org

American Federation of Teachers: www.aft.org

Michigan Federation of Teachers: www.aftmichigan.org

University of Michigan Graduate Employee Organization: www.umgeo.org

The Coalition of Graduate Employee Unions: www.cgeu.org

American Association of University Professors: www.aaup.org

Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor: www.cust.educ.ubc.ca/workplace/

Notes: