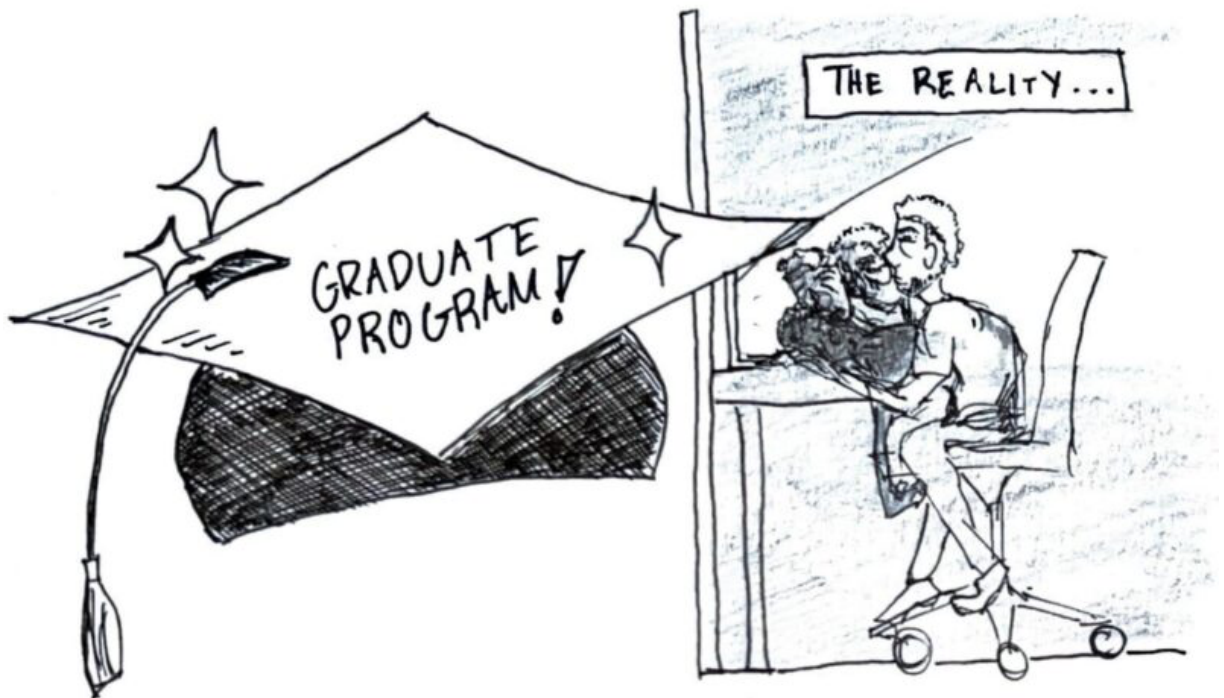

OPINIONS

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

From humble beginnings to collective power



COURTESY MARY JERRED, ILLUSTRATIONS EDITOR

By HIMANSHU AHUJA

January 27, 2025

After months of protests and negotiations, the University finally reached an agreement last December regarding all Ph.D. students currently receiving a stipend, committing to a free and fair union election this spring. Yet, just days ago, the University unexpectedly reversed course about the very agreement it had proposed, casting doubt on its commitment to a timely election. This delay is especially concerning as the new Trump

Administration attempts to undermine graduate worker unions and suppress the voices of those who drive university research and teaching. The union election, a major milestone reached through years of action and reflection, is now at risk. At this critical moment, it's crucial for all Ph.D. students to understand that such bureaucratic stalling is not new. It was precisely because of this pattern of neglect that the Graduate Labor Union (GLU) came to be.

When I arrived in the U.S. in 2019 to pursue a Ph.D. in Brain and Cognitive Sciences, I was thrilled. Coming from New Delhi, I was excited to conduct experimental work that wasn't possible back home. The clean air was another major draw — New Delhi has some of the worst air quality in the world. In my early years as a Ph.D. worker, I prioritized academic achievement above all else. I worked late nights, came in on weekends, and dismissed senior graduates' warnings about burnout. Over time, however, isolation crept in. Being far from family and lifelong friends took a toll on my mental health, and I realized I needed balance. Socializing, traveling, and eating well became priorities to maintain consistent academic progress.

Living in Rochester, however, posed its own challenges. Without a car, even basic errands like grocery shopping required multiple bus transfers and took an entire day. By the end of my first year, I saved enough to buy a used car — a necessity for maintaining any semblance of work-life balance. This would have been impossible if I'd had to send money home, raise kids, or if I were an international student today. Since 2019, inflation-adjusted wages for UR's graduate workers have fallen by 7.5–15%. By the end of last year, I could no longer afford to maintain my car and had to

sell it. The financial hardships I face today are not unique and are far less severe than many of the stories we've heard during the union campaign.

Leadership has always been a core part of my personal and academic journey, even before arriving at the University of Rochester. At UR, I was elected to the Graduate Student Association (GSA), serving as the Academic Programming Officer in my second year and later as the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Officer. However, these roles felt largely symbolic. Grievances brought to administrators were often lost in bureaucratic layers, with little transparency about whether our suggestions had actually influenced University policy. Our primary responsibilities were reduced to organizing coffee hours and socials — important, but far from the impactful leadership roles I had envisioned. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed the lack of meaningful representation for graduate workers. Many of us in GSA during 2020–2021 grew frustrated and left to pursue other goals. By 2022, the situation had worsened — GSA representatives sat on numerous committees but had no real influence.

In mid-2022, current and former GSA members joined forces with other concerned graduate workers to take matters into their own hands. Under the banner of the Graduate Student Collective (GSC), the predecessor to GLU, we surveyed graduate workers' mental and financial well-being. The response was overwhelming — nearly 500 Ph.D. students completed the survey within two weeks. The results were disheartening, but the personal anecdotes were truly heartbreaking.

We compiled a report detailing these financial hardships alongside personal stories and sent an open letter to the administration. With grad student issues now public knowledge, it became harder for administrators to ignore us. Meetings with deans and provosts

followed, leading to some immediate changes: All full-time Ph.D. students were granted health insurance coverage — an almost \$3,000 pay increase for those previously paying out-of-pocket. This demonstrated that the University is capable of taking swift action when faced with mounting collective evidence and pressure from an organized graduate worker movement. It was a small but significant victory.

Still, much work remained. Despite these gains, all UR graduate workers earned less than the MIT-defined living wage for Rochester — and English, Math, History, and Eastman graduate workers earned below minimum wage when stipends were translated to an hourly wage. Most worked more than 40 hours per week. Over the following months, we held numerous meetings with administrators, but progress stalled. Promised action plans went unmet; meetings were canceled; some administrators outright refused to engage with us. When we sought formal recognition for GSC as a leadership group for graduate workers with the Office of Graduate Education and Postdoctoral Affairs, our application was denied on the grounds that its mission overlapped with GSA — a notion that GSA members themselves rejected. Today, the GSA no longer exists. This effectively leaves no avenue for graduate workers to advocate to the administration through “official” channels.

By early 2023, with every avenue for collaboration blocked by the administration, we recognized that only collective action could achieve fair treatment for graduate student workers. A union would provide a legally mandated process requiring the administration to negotiate and address issues crucial to Ph.D. students. While the GSC focused on securing a living wage and comprehensive health insurance, the GLU has embraced a broader mission. The union will not only advocate for better wages and

benefits but also support graduate worker parents and international students, foster a sense of community for addressing Ph.D. grievances, including issues of discrimination and harassment, and serve as an intermediary in academic conflicts. By focusing on these interconnected needs, the GLU seeks to empower all graduate workers and create a more equitable, supportive academic environment.

As we rapidly approach the upcoming union election, remember: This movement was born out of necessity and shaped by resilience. Join us on Thursday, Jan 30, at 3:30 p.m. in front of the Interfaith Chapel, on public land, to deliver a letter to President Mangelsdorf. Together, we will demand the immediate signing of the election agreement to ensure fair and timely elections for union representation. Sign a union card and share it with a friend! You can also reach out to us to learn more about union efforts at <https://urgradunion.com/> or urgradunion@gmail.com.

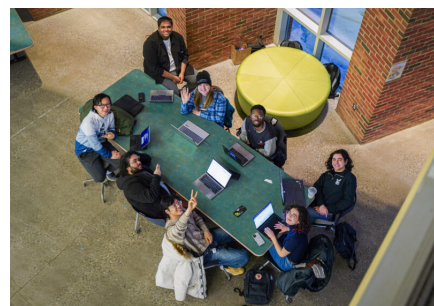
Tagged: GRADUATE SCHOOL GRADUATE STUDENT UNION UNIONS

CLUB

On the need for a Creative Expo

By NARM NATHAN on Feb 11, 2025

In the fall of 2022, those efforts culminated in the creation of Rochester Producers & Musicians (RPM), a group designed as a space for creatives to network, showcase, and embody the creativity integral to their identity.



K-POP

Notes by Nadia: K-pop is just pop ... in Korean

By NADIA PENTOLINO on Feb 15, 2025

It feels like K-pop is being held to a standard that isn't equivalent to the Western pop scene.

