

Stanford's Graduate Student Union Tries to Stifle Dissent

The university may fire me because I won't pay dues to a labor organization whose views I find repugnant.

By Jon Hartley

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pm ET



Stanford University campus in Stanford, Calif., March 28. PHOTO: JUSTIN SULLIVAN/GETTY IMAGES

I'm working as a teaching assistant while studying for a doctorate in economics at Stanford, but a campus union is trying to get me fired. The Stanford Graduate Workers Union wants my head on a plate because I refused to sign a membership form and pay dues. I won't fund an organization whose values and tactics I don't support.

Similar unions across the country are using their bargaining power not to improve working conditions but to coerce ideological conformity. This isn't solidarity; it's suppression. Shame on Stanford for going along with it.

In June, the union began seeking to bar graduate students who refuse to pay dues or agency fees from working as teaching or research assistants. That threat is now a reality. The university has told me and several other teaching assistants that we will be fired unless we pay up.

At the University of Chicago, graduate students in a similar position have taken their union to federal court, arguing that forced support of the union violates their constitutional rights. In *Graduate Students for Academic Freedom v. Graduate Students United*, the plaintiffs—including Jewish students—say they are being compelled to fund a union that promotes the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement against Israel, a stance they view as antisemitic.

The graduate unions at both Stanford and Chicago are registered as local chapters of the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America, a national union that funds progressive activism. In 2015, it became the first national union to support the BDS movement. The Chicago lawsuit, filed in July 2024, invokes *Janus v. Afsome*, the Supreme Court's 2018 ruling that public employees can't be forced to subsidize political speech they disagree with. The Stanford Graduate Workers Union similarly adopted an anti-Israel statement in 2023.

At both Stanford and Chicago, union leadership insists that such coercion is routine—part of collective bargaining. But there's a world of difference between negotiating wages and punishing dissenters. When students are told they can't work, teach or study unless they pay dues to a political organization, it's no longer about labor rights—it's about freedom of association, conscience and speech.

Graduate students first formed a union at Stanford in July 2023, and the school signed a collective-bargaining agreement in October 2024 to avoid a strike. The agreement mandates financial support of the union as a condition of employment at the university. The national union supports progressive causes such as abortion, public subsidies for "gender-affirming care," and defunding the police. Because the union's advocacy contravenes my Roman Catholic faith, I am seeking a religious-objector accommodation under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act. Stanford claims qualification for such an accommodation is at the discretion of the union.

Campus labor groups once motivated by economic fairness are increasingly governed by ideological litmus tests. When students push back or refuse to participate financially, their academic futures are threatened. University administrators should stand up for their students and ensure that union membership and fee payments are voluntary, protect the ability of students to work and study regardless of political affiliation, and enforce constitutional safeguards on compelled speech and association, especially at private institutions that contract with and receive grants from the federal government.

Graduate student unions can play a vital role in advocating for fair treatment. But they must not become engines of progressive coercion. Freedom to dissent—including from

union politics—is foundational to the academic enterprise. No student should face financial retaliation for exercising that freedom.

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