

Hi! I'm Ben.

First of all, thanks to all of you for the time, energy, and passion you've poured into CGSU. I respect, admire, and appreciate your hard work.

I am a CGSU member who is interested in and excited about our union, believes it is important, and does not have the time to help shape the union as a committee member. Yesterday I attended my first General Assembly meeting, which I thought was an extremely fascinating and somewhat exhilarating fiasco. I ultimately voted against, but was delighted by, the working-group-led vote on a vote on a vote. To the extent that enthusiastic debate is the best tool we have to collectively craft an organization, last night's GA seemed extremely successful. What felt less productive was the degree to which it was confusing and, in an often strangely undirected way, antagonistic.

The union has been a topic of conversation I find coming up again and again across campus, which seems promising for CGSU's future. More ominously, I have also found a frequently echoed but somewhat inchoate frustration or discomfort amongst the rank and file with how little we know about the substantive details of precisely who this union is, what it does, and why. **The success of CGSU requires regular members like me feeling informed enough to be able to participate meaningfully, however a culture of silence and dismissiveness that I do not entirely understand has made that difficult.**

My impression is that the recent referendum vote was an attempt to meet this challenge by fostering open discussion, however the vote approached its actual intent so obliquely out of a desire not to ruffle feathers that the primary result was confusion. The real point, as I understood it, was an attempt to define, by precedence, where decision making power lies. This was more fundamentally a question about our relationship to the AFT, in ways that remain obscure – because we never actually discussed that relationship! Personally, I don't know how I feel about our relationship with the AFT. I don't know which of you are happy or unhappy with that relationship. But I (and I am quite sure many, many other grad students) am extremely unhappy that no one is either willing or able to explain this clearly.

Indeed, **my perception, as a CGSU member, is that challenging questions or dissenting opinions have been consistently deflected or dismissed out of hand instead of substantively answered.** Last night's GA meeting vilified the At What Cost campaign as "anti-union" rabble rousers who are "spreading misinformation". My imagined personification of the GA meeting (who wears a tweed jacket with a pocket protector and a coffee stain, believes labor rights are important because power asymmetries between workers and employers can be dangerous, and is frequently uncertain where he is or how he got there) then yelled "Hey look over there!", dropped a smoke-bomb, slipped out the door in the confusion, and hoped that by morning we'd all forget what the question was. **At What Cost has arisen because there is currently an information vacuum about what this union is and what it's doing.** They are doing us the

service of drawing attention to the sorts of questions many graduate students want answered, and that we must answer if we are to garner broad, full throated support. **To dismiss the concerns of any graduate student who we aim to represent as “anti-union” and therefore unimportant is strategically foolish, and morally troubling. The question At What Cost raises about dues does not erode my confidence in this union; an apparent summary dismissal of those questions does.**

A final example of what I saw as CGSU being dismissive of critique was the question of organizers visiting homes. I have not been visited at home by an organizer, and before the GA was neither aware that this was happening, nor that people were unhappy about it. I also don't particularly mind being visited myself. All of which is to say: I am fairly close to an uninvolved observer on this matter. And what I saw was this: CGSU members voiced clear unhappiness with organizers visiting their homes. Someone responded that home visits increase membership. That was the end of the conversation.

While I appreciate that a union's power is directly proportional to its membership and that growing the union ranks is important, **a union's legitimacy comes from how those members feel they are being treated and are represented by their union.** Last night, union members stated unambiguously that they did not like how they were being treated, and the response was: too bad, we know better; trust us, there's research. I certainly believe that house visits increase membership. I also believe the ignoring the will of CGSU members will, absolutely and inevitably, enfeeble and ultimately destroy this union. I'm not necessarily saying we should *not* be visiting homes – I don't know what fraction of union members are unhappy with or happy with these visits or why, and frankly, neither do you. Because like in the case of At What Cost, rather than discussing this dissenting perspective, it was deftly ignored. At some point during the GA meeting, university emails regarding union matters were categorized as “paternalistic”. **Observing at the GA meeting a pervasive, fundamentally paternalistic dismissiveness towards differing opinions was therefore surprising, not to mention ironic and destructive.**

I am not calling for specific actions, other than open discussion. I am not “anti-union”, though I fear my critique may be misinterpreted as such. I am a strongly pro-union graduate student who is disturbed by what I observed at the recent GA meeting, and am worried about the viability of our organization in light of those observations. My aim is open discussion. If we define “anti-union” as words or actions that are detrimental to the continued existence of CGSU, I believe that attempts to impede such open discussion is archetypal anti-unionism.

Again, I thank you all. Please know that this letter comes from a genuine desire to see CGSU survive and flourish, that I understand that starting a union is a herculean task, and that I'm grateful for all that you've done and do for us, the graduate student workers of Cornell.

Sincerely,
Ben Savitzky