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State of the unions

Graduate students at a US university went on strike for the right to unionize last week. Postdocs at another used their newly formed union to increase stipends and improve benefits last month. It seems that waves of organized labour are rippling through the academic institutions of the United States. But all this activity raises the question of whether unions are a better way to change labour conditions — including salary, benefits and hours — than less confrontational bodies within the system, such as postdoc and graduate-student associations.

Graduate students at Columbia University in New York voted to unionize two years ago, but they were denied the right to do so after the university appealed to the National Labor Relations Board. Their boycott of classroom duties last week involved roughly 400 teaching assistants. Students participating in the strike said that the threat of unionization was the best way to ensure that the graduate student's stipend, boosted to \$17,000 before the strike, continued to rise.

Postdocs at the University of Connecticut last month used their union, which has only been operating for a year, to negotiate a better benefits package. Collective bargaining managed to raise the minimum postdoc stipend from \$27,000 to \$34,200 and to win them health insurance, paid sick leave and holidays, and a standard grievance procedure.

At the same time, the non-union postdoc associations continue to proliferate; the US National Postdoctoral Association, which coordinates local groups, has just held its second annual meeting. It seems likely that unions and local postdoc associations will both have a role to play in future events. The associations, which have traditionally served as networking and career guidance bodies, are now raising issues of pay and benefits. But unions may, ultimately, address such issues more successfully.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor



Contents

CAREERS AND RECRUITMENT

Tropical medicine
gets a boost

p966

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Career centre
Information on the
scientific job market

FOCUS

SPOTLIGHT

RECRUITMENT

ANNOUNCEMENTS

EVENTS