

CAREERS

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The spread of postdoc unions

Unionizing has become more common at US campuses, but postdocs should weigh up the pros and cons of membership.

BY VIRGINIA GEWIN

Bruce Adams, a postdoctoral researcher at the Diabetes Center at the University of California, San Francisco, isn't anti-union. But like many postdocs in the University of California (UC) system, he voiced concerns about the United Auto Workers (UAW) union during its initial attempt to become the representative for the roughly 6,400 postdocs at ten UC campuses in 2006. Adams, who helped to form a campus organization to air postdocs' trepidations about unionization, says dozens

of people formally complained that they were given inaccurate or confusing information when approached to sign a card authorizing the UAW's representation.

Matthew O'Connor, then a UAW spokesman at UC Berkeley, blames a lack of communication for the confusion that was rampant four years ago. "We weren't prepared to deal with the misinformation," he says. That first unionization attempt failed, largely because the university pushed to reclassify many postdocs so that they were not technically 'employees'. O'Connor credits the UAW's successful

unionization attempt in 2008 to an informative website and a more coordinated canvassing effort.

Two years later in August, the UC postdoc union, now known as Postdoctoral Researchers Organize/UAW (PRO/UAW), negotiated a contract with salary increases, retirement contributions and safeguards governing terms of employment for UC postdocs. The agreement, celebrated by many UC postdocs, sent shock waves through research institutions around North America — raising the profile of post-doc grievances, spreading a fear of unionization, and, in some universities, prompting administrations to proactively address post-doc inequities.

Despite the benefits unionization provides, many postdocs, such as Adams, remain sceptical. Some are concerned about possible tension between mentors and mentees that could result from unionization. Others worry about whether the unions will be able to deliver contract promises, and the possibility that mandated higher salaries will, ultimately, strain research grants, forcing funders or principal investigators to make tough choices.

Others, particularly university administrators, question the model itself. Traditionally designed to protect career positions, unions might not be appropriate for temporary apprentices who are tied more to a specific laboratory than to an institution. Regardless, postdocs should be careful to balance the benefits with the downsides — and understand what they're signing up for (see 'Membership pros and cons').

"In this environment, it was pretty natural to say unionization is the way to have a voice."

STATE OF THE UNION

It was perhaps inevitable that postdocs would explore the advantages of unionization. On many campuses, postdocs are effectively a voiceless group of highly trained researchers, working alongside unionized graduate teaching and research assistants. In view of postdocs' variable pay — due to the disparate funding streams used to pay the surging number of postdocs (the number in the United States has almost tripled in the past 30 years to an estimated 90,000) — the interest in unions should not come as a surprise.

Meanwhile, the postdoc position worldwide is changing. What was once a 1–2 ▶

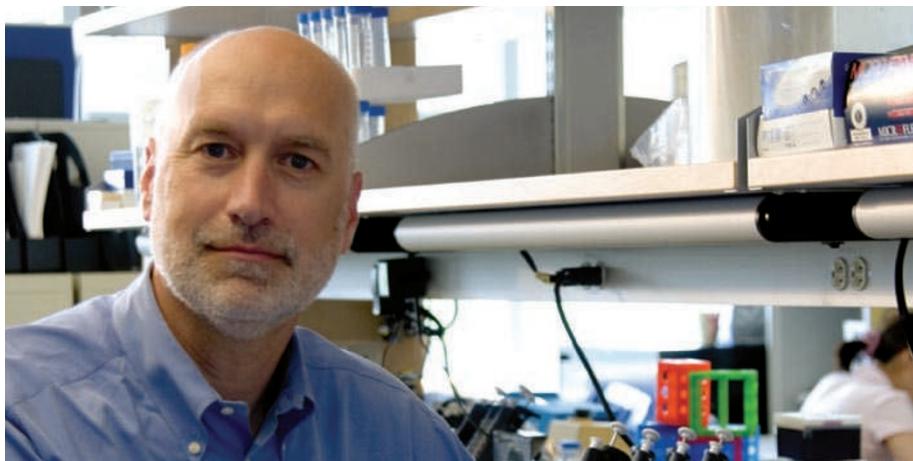
► year training experience is increasingly morphing into a bona fide job lasting several years. Many postdocs are starting families, buying homes and initiating retirement funds during the same 2–5 years that they are toiling away — while competing with each other to become one of the lucky ones to secure a tenure-track job. Vulnerable, they want compensation and protection.

Thus far, postdoc unions have come about because of existing university union organizations, and the efforts of dedicated and determined postdocs. At the University of Massachusetts campuses at Amherst, postdocs were the only group of employees not unionized, and university management is used to responding to grievances from union representatives, so conditions were favourable for unionization. Last February, most of the approximately 300 postdocs at Amherst agreed to form a union with the UAW, and are now beginning contract negotiations. "In this environment, it was pretty natural to say unionization is the way to have a voice," says James Staros, provost and vice-chancellor for academic affairs at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. "It'll be a success here because it fits our culture."

On other campuses, postdocs avoid pursuing unionization as it poses a culture clash. Instead, some appeal directly to university administrators to get their needs met. Daniel Boutz, a postdoc and volunteer organizer of the biological sciences' postdoctoral association at the University of Austin at Texas, has been working for years, with modest success, to get postdoc inequities addressed by the administration. Boutz contends that their best bet is to present requested changes as a wise investment that will benefit university research.

It is too early to tell whether unionization will be a success at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Although postdocs there have agreed to form a union, they and the administration have yet to hammer out a contract. Faculty members and graduate students were already unionized, but administrators were caught off guard when postdocs formed a union with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) in July 2009. "The administration was gradually moving towards forming an office dedicated to postdoc issues, so the move to unionize caught us by surprise," says Jerome Kukor, a microbiologist and dean of academic programmes and research at Rutgers University.

Former UC graduate students sparked the California movement after finding they had fewer protections and benefits when they became postdocs. The marriage with the UAW may have been one of convenience, but it was also one of the few unions able to execute a large operation over several campuses. "They were already on UC campuses representing graduate students and they were one of the only unions that had the resources — money



Peter Hitchcock says university administrators should proactively address postdocs' concerns.

and know-how — to do it," says O'Connor.

Postdoc status can have a big impact on gathering union support. After postdocs at the University of Western Ontario, Canada, agreed in 2008 to unionize following three years of unsuccessfully lobbying for improved benefits and services, the university required that all postdocs be classified either as fellows (independent contractors) or associates (university employees). Most were classified as fellows, which, at the time, meant their salaries would not be taxed. This meant that the number of postdocs labelled as employees and thus eligible to join a union decreased from 236 to 30 — effectively stalling negotiations.

In an unfortunate twist a year later, the Canadian Revenue Agency decided that all postdocs should be subjected to taxation, just like employees (see *Nature* doi:10.1038/news.2010.429; 2010). As a result, some postdocs now take home less pay than graduate students who are not taxed — a fact many

postdocs lament. "It's insulting to get paid less than the graduate students we teach," says Marianne Stanford, chair of the Canadian Association of Postdoctoral Scholars and a postdoc at the University of Ottawa's Health Research Institute. With talks stalled, postdocs at the University of Western Ontario are waiting until the Ontario Labour Relations Board rules whether all postdocs, both fellows and associates, will be considered part of the union.

In the case of the PRO/UAW, motivated postdocs pushed the university system to reach an agreement. It had been more than a year, and they still had no contract. Postdocs on all ten UC campuses picketed, saying that the university should not use the state budget crisis as an excuse to delay an agreement. The uproar led to a state congressional hearing in April. The August agreement includes many of the postdocs' demands, although they had to accept a graduated pay increase to avoid any potential cash-flow problems in individual research labs — something that could, inadvertently, have led to postdoc layoffs, says O'Connor.

CASE STUDY

Membership pros and cons

Potential advantages

- Pay increase.
- Equal access to health insurance.
- Defined, standardized terms of holiday and maternity leave.
- A formal mechanism to air grievances.

Potential disadvantages

- Union dues — in the case of the University of California PRO/UAW union, dues represent one-third of the pay rise that most will receive (1% of the 3%).
- Existing research grant budgets may have to be altered to pay for salary increases.
- Strained mentor–mentee relations.
- Possibility of a strike that could disrupt postdoc priorities.

UNION UPS AND DOWNS

Pay increases, sought by many pro-union postdocs, may have complex implications. Under the new contract, UC postdocs earning less than US\$47,000, the majority, will receive a 3% raise; those earning more than \$47,000 will receive a 1.5% raise. In exchange, the union receives 0.85% and 1.15% of the salaries of non-union and union members, respectively. Paying dues was the main downside postdocs raised about unionization. For their efforts, unions will receive roughly one-third of the salary increases.

The pay increase itself will cost the UC \$8.4 million for 6,420 postdocs, according to the UC Office of the President — money that will come from principal investigator grants or department funds, not from university overheads, according to a 21 September e-mail by Graham Fleming, vice-chancellor for ►

research at UC Berkeley. Even before that e-mail, some faculty members were concerned that unionization would, ultimately, lead to fewer postdoc posts and fewer opportunities for graduate students.

As salaries increase, in theory, less money is available for other grant expenditures. This could hit some grant budgets harder than others. For example, the average US National Science Foundation award is significantly less than that of the National Institutes of Health. The National Science Foundation intends to reassess its grant proposal guidelines if the need arises, according to Dana Topousis, an agency spokeswoman. She adds that grantees do have some flexibility to transfer funds from one budget category to another, which could help.

Principal investigators might have to make difficult staffing changes to meet budgets. "If you make the postdoc stipend prohibitively high, principal investigators will opt to hire more graduate students," says Carlito Lebrilla, a chemist at UC Davis who is tracking union developments. "Some people see unionization as devastating to the research endeavour." There is also the question of whether the more senior, successful principal investigators will be better equipped to absorb extra post-doc costs than newer investigators.

Others fear that union-sanctioned activities will interfere with their postdoc responsibilities — being asked to strike being the most obvious example. But union supporters and non-supporters alike agree that striking — the ultimate bargaining chip of unions — isn't realistic for postdocs. Postdocs need to publish papers to have a chance of obtaining a faculty job; few postdocs are likely to adhere to a strike if the union called for one. The final UC post-doc contract stipulates that postdocs will not strike, taking a risky strategy off the table. "We didn't want to have postdocs put that kind of pressure on themselves," says Norval Hickman, a union supporter and clinical psychology postdoc at UC San Francisco. "We need a good letter of recommendation to get that first independent academic position — and there were definitely concerns that a strike would create an environment that might make that difficult."

Union contracts could present other problems. Kukor hopes that Rutgers' negotiations don't affect the flexible way in which many faculty staff mentor postdocs. "Each postdoc

I've worked with over the past 25 years is unique, and I work to accommodate their individual needs," he says. "I'm concerned that a standardized contract may remove some of the degrees of freedom I use to tailor career development."

SOFT POWER

The prospect of unionization has prompted many academic institutions to actively address postdoc concerns — potentially obviating unionization completely. Many institutions that train postdocs hope to avoid unions by recognizing postdocs' value and treating them fairly, says Peter Hitchcock, director of the office of postdoctoral studies at the University of Michigan Medical School in Ann Arbor. At his university, that includes providing a range of career development services — including workshops on how to set up a laboratory and opportunities to learn about career options outside academia — intended to help postdocs to realize their career goals. Megan Ballinger, president of the University of Michigan postdoctoral association, notes that unionization isn't an issue at the medical school, despite Michigan's automotive and union legacy.

Administrators don't necessarily need the pressure of union provisions to spur extraordinary measures. Consider the case of Traci Lyons. In 2007, she was only seven days into a postdoc appointment at the University of Colorado in Denver when she discovered she was pregnant. Because the school had no maternity-leave policy in place, her mentor worked with the legal department to establish a 45-day maternity leave specific to Lyons. A year later, Lyons was asked to help the administration draft a much-needed set of postdoc policies — including guidelines for minimum salaries, terms of employment and maternity leave. John Freed, dean of the graduate school of the Anschutz Medical Campus of the University of Denver, oversaw the creation of an office of postdoctoral affairs and helped secure the \$250,000 necessary to ensure that all postdocs on campus received health care and disability benefits. O'Connor, however, notes that without a union-backed contract, a university could reverse its decisions at any time.

Not every campus will be proactive and take such steps. Budding scientists would be wise to gauge the changing landscape of postdoc unionization. And institutions would be wise to anticipate postdoc needs (see *Nature* 467, 624; 2010). O'Connor says he has received many requests from postdocs and postdoc associations for information about how the UC unionized. "Postdocs are essential to an institution's research efforts," says Hitchcock. "Institutions that do not acknowledge that do so at their own risk" ■

Virginia Gewin is a freelance writer in Portland, Oregon.



"Some people see unionization as devastating to the research endeavour."

Carlito Lebrilla

POSTDOCS

Official appreciation

National Postdoc Appreciation Week was officially recognized by the US Congress on 23 September. The move confers no funding and creates no laws. But it is vital for building awareness of postdocs' research contributions as well as of their compensation issues and other woes, says Cathee Johnson Phillips, executive director of the National Postdoc Association (NPA) in Washington DC. The NPA, along with institutions nationwide, began the week in 2009. This year, it was 20–24 September and more than 70 institutions took part. In the past, most legislators knew little about postdocs, says Phillips. "Now, when our members talk to them about compensation and benefits, they'll say, 'Let's talk,' not 'What's a postdoc?'" she says.

FUNDING

Plant grants announced

To boost interest in plant research, the Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI) in Chevy Chase, Maryland, will for the first time fund plant-science investigator awards. The HHMI and its co-funder, the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation in Palo Alto, California, will allocate up to 15 awards worth a total of US\$75 million. Plant science is underfunded in the United States, says Robert Tjian, the institute's president, adding that plants serve as useful experimental models for biomedical research. Awardees must have run their own lab for at least four years. They will receive a five-year appointment that may be renewed indefinitely for further five-year terms. The deadline for applications is 9 November.

AWARDS

Travel for collaboration

To promote cross-disciplinary research and collaboration, the Burroughs Wellcome Fund in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, has created travel awards of up to US\$15,000 each for US and Canadian citizens or permanent residents. Applicants should hold or be pursuing a PhD in chemistry, physics, mathematics, computer science, statistics or engineering, and want to investigate biological questions with another lab or through attending a course. Biologists looking to collaborate with, or learn from, a physical scientist can also apply. The funds are for travel expenses anywhere in the world by the end of 2012. The deadline is 1 December 2010; winners will be announced by 1 March 2011.