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Graduate assistants at FSU join UFF

Graduate employees at Florida State University have voted by more than a three-to-one margin to be represented by the United Faculty of Florida (UFF) in collective bargaining with the university.

Their newly approved union, United Faculty of Florida-Florida State University-Graduate Assistants United (UFF-FSU-GAU), became the official representative of 2,800 graduate employees at FSU in balloting that concluded May 1. Despite end-of-semester exams, 600 graduate employees cast ballots and 76 percent voted in favor of UFF representation. The turnout was strong considering the time of year: It was the last two days of final exams and many stayed in town just to cast their vote.

“We teach a majority of the classes at FSU” said UFF-FSU-GAU Co-President Danielle Holbrook. “We are the largest group of employees on campus but we have been working without job security or health insurance. Our workloads have been increasing while our salary remains the same, which means in this economy we’re being paid less each year. Without our labor, the university could not function, but we’ve had no legal voice in how we are treated, so we organized a union and are ready to negotiate with the university.”

The successful vote is the result of a campaign by graduate employees at FSU with the help of UFF. In November 2007, a group of graduate employees from all areas of campus met to discuss the idea of forming a union. UFF conducted trainings and assisted them in their grassroots, door-to-door effort to mobilize a campaign. Concerned about increasing workloads in light of state budget cuts, substandard, inadequate pay, and expensive health insurance that must be purchased by employees with only a small subsidy provided by FSU to only some employees, they began a drive to petition Florida’s Public Employees Relations Commission for a union election. They got 55 percent of the employees to sign cards for union representation.

A huge source of support came from international students in engineering and the hard sciences who live in FSU campus housing. They mobilized for quality of life

issues, including health insurance and better pay, but also for respect and a voice in their lives, including doing something about the substandard housing conditions and limited childcare options. The union was endorsed by the Chinese Student Association president.

“The results of this election would not have been possible without the strong support of the Florida Education Association and the National Education Association,” said UFF Executive Director Ed Mitchell.

UFF represents the faculty at 12 universities and nine colleges. In addition, UFF represents the graduate assistants at the University of Florida, Florida A&M University and the University of South Florida.

The Florida Education Association is the state's largest association of professional employees, with more than 140,000 members. FEA represents pre K-12 teachers, higher education faculty, educational support professionals, students at our colleges and universities preparing to become teachers and retired education employees.