



University of Washington Washington State University | The Evergreen State College Bellevue College

Western Washington University Central Washington University Eastern Washington University

Proposal

Issue: Student Unionization on University Campuses

Presenter(s): Rosa Rice-Pelepko, ASWWU Legislative Liaison, Ana Ramirez, ASWWU Vice President for Governmental Affairs, Simrun Chhabra, ASWWU President

In Washington State, and across the country, there has been a history of using student employees in higher education as a “cost saving alternative” to full time staff. This usually results in students being underpaid, overworked, under-appreciated, and actively harmed while in their working and learning environment. In order to combat this, graduate students at research universities in Washington have been unionized for years. After their unionization, they noticed a change in their relationship with the university. They are now treated better, paid more, and are allowed to have a voice in the terms of their employment. Unfortunately, the legislation that forces universities to negotiate with their graduate students does not apply to undergraduates. This means that undergraduate student employees are often voiceless in their university and get taken advantage of. Next legislative session, the Washington Student Association should advocate for legislation that would force universities to recognize undergraduate student unions. To be clear, this legislation would not compel undergrad employees to unionize but, if they chose to do so, this legislation would make their universities respect their collective voice and negotiate with them.

Student employment has become a particularly troubling topic in recent years. Last spring, the WSA became aware of issues involving student employees on Western’s campus and we have heard from campuses around the state that these issues are not unique to WWU. Students are capped at working 19 hours a week, but that very rarely happens. We are not allowed to engage in contract negotiations within our university. We are told that our “academics come first” but those words are not followed by action. In short, we are treated as less than other employees on campus. In order to protect students, and student employees, we should be allowed to unionize and have an impact on the terms of our employees within our universities.

Western has begun reaching out to potential allies in this effort, including the unionized grad students at UW, the unionized faculty from Western, Central, Eastern, and Evergreen, and the Washington State Labor Council. There seems to be wide ranging support on the issue. On the legislative side, there would be no fiscal note. The impact of this would be enormous. Student unionization is a continuous struggle across the country and the impact of a victory like this would further student welfare in Washington and well beyond the state.