



Frequently Asked Questions

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What is a union?

A union is a legally recognized organization that represents the employees at a workplace. There are many different unions across almost every industry around the globe. They have an incredibly long history, but today they're the most effective way for workers to help shape their working conditions. When workers stand together, they can achieve things they can't do alone.

Who is included in our union?

When we formed our union, we conducted a campaign to raise awareness of our goals and ask people to support us. This campaign ended in an election overseen by the National Labor Relations Board. Because of the rules governing the election process, we were forced to make some hard decisions based on who had expressed their support for the union, who the Brandeis administration was willing to accept as a part of the union, and who the NLRB would recognize. **Today, all PhD students engaged in instructional duties are considered part of our union**, except for those in the Rabb School. Research assistants and Master's students aren't included, although we may be able to expand the union in the future, if these groups want to join with us.

What are our goals?

The goal of the union is to develop, negotiate, and enforce a **collective bargaining agreement** between Brandeis and graduate student workers. This contract is the only guarantee that we can hold on to what we have, and the only way we have to fight for better working conditions and higher wages. Without the union, Brandeis administrators can change the terms of our employment at any time, putting us at a constant risk of loss of pay, benefits, or fair working conditions. The union was formed to give us a chance to bring the changes we believe are urgently needed on this campus, and to give us a unified voice that will be heard more clearly than any of us would be on our own.

Who decides what goes into our contract?

You do.

It really is as simple as that. As the members of the union, you and your colleagues decide what we negotiate. We've elected a bargaining committee to help streamline the process, but the committee members are our representatives. And they need your help. The administration is extremely resistant to most improvements in our working conditions that we've proposed, and it's only by working together that we can reach a satisfactory agreement. **Anyone in the bargaining unit now, or who will be, is welcome to attend bargaining.** At the end of bargaining, everyone who signs up to become a member will vote on whether or not the contract will be ratified, which is another chance to take ownership of your contract.

How does bargaining work?

When we bargain a contract, our representatives meet with members of the administration to discuss the workplace issues we believe our contract should cover. Most of the time, this means explaining our problems and concerns to the administration, and then working together to find solutions we can both accept. Sometimes this also means protecting the things we believe are working well.

Collective bargaining is an incredible process, really: the administration is put on an equal level with its employees, so that we can shape our own working conditions instead of being told what to accept. It's a great opportunity to get past some of the barriers we face when we bring problems to our supervisors. We might not always get exactly what we want, but they can't just ignore us in bargaining.

How can I make sure my voice is heard?

The best way is to get involved. That can take many forms: attending bargaining sessions, joining the bargaining committee, or helping with our outreach efforts. Having conversations with your colleagues about what's important to them, and sharing that information with the bargaining committee is easy to do and is so, so important. The more people that share their perspectives on the contract with us, the better equipped we are to fight for what our members want.

What is SEIU Local 509?

We didn't create our union from scratch. Instead, we decided to partner with the same union our adjunct faculty joined: Service Employees International Union. Local 509 (a division of the larger union working here in Massachusetts) represents human service and education workers throughout the state. SEIU is currently the fastest-growing adjunct and graduate student worker union in the country, and is at the forefront of the struggle to represent workers who have been working tirelessly for equal representation in the labor movement - workers just like us!

What are dues?

It takes money to run a union. Members are asked to pay a small portion of their wages to the union to help cover the costs of its operation. At SEIU Local 509, dues are 1.5% of our wages, but they don't go into effect until after our contract is ratified. Right now, the average wage for a graduate assistant at Brandeis is about \$3,200 per year, meaning that dues would only be \$48 for the year (the rest of the money you receive as a stipend isn't considered "wages"). **Of course, one of our goals is to raise everyone's wage - and we aim to raise them enough to cover the cost of dues and provide a significant increase to our income.**

Dues make a lot of people nervous, and we understand. When you don't make a lot of money, it can seem like a big hardship to give any of it away. It's important to keep in mind that our dues pay for all the costs associated with representing us at Brandeis, including paying for the staff and materials that we use to help accomplish our goals.

The Local retains a top employment law firm for legal support; members have access to union labor experts of all types and from all employment sectors. We also get connected to larger networks with resources beyond what we could afford on our own. Plus, with the financial deals members get (www.seiumb.com), membership typically pays for itself!

Legally, however, you have the right to opt out of full dues payment if you don't support the union and the work it does on your behalf. Objectors are legally entitled to pay a smaller percentage of their wages (currently 1.24%), are still covered by the contract, and will still receive assistance in enforcing it, but don't get any of the additional rights of membership - including a voice in helping shape the union in the future.