Hi there, r/science! We are postdoctoral researchers (aka postdocs) at the University of Washington (UW) in Seattle who are forming a postdoc union.

Postdocs are researchers in academic labs who have already obtained a doctorate in their field of study and continue to conduct mentored research. In general, postdocs perform the bulk of the research that gets done at universities across the country and world. In theory and historically, a scientist would likely choose to become a postdoc to develop a project and new skills to prepare them to lead their independent research group. Today, due to a number of factors, including a lack of PhD-level jobs and increasing demand for postdoctoral experience for non-academic positions, more scientists with doctoral degrees than ever before hold one or more postdoc positions. In addition, a shrinking fraction of postdocs go on to stay in academia.

We are working with our fellow postdocs to form a union because we feel it is vital to improve the working conditions and benefits of postdocs. After talking with hundreds of postdocs here at UW, we’ve heard that our colleagues top concerns are compensation, international workers’ protections, and gender equity. Despite being an integral part of the research apparatus at the university, many postdocs struggle to support themselves and their families in an expensive city, and feel the stress of job insecurity on a day-to-day basis. We hope to make meaningful changes and improvements to our jobs through bargaining with the UW Administration to obtain a contract that accounts for the real-life challenges that postdocs face. We are working together with the United Auto Workers (UAW) to run an effective union campaign relying on majority support among postdocs. UAW represents the largest number of academic workers in the country, including the academic graduate and undergraduate employees here at UW.

Links: The UW Postdoc United’s website has lots of information, including data and stories that highlight the value of unions for postdocs and academia in general. Check it out!

Brian recently wrote an op-ed in Science highlighting why he’s a United Academic Worker. Carolyn wrote an opinion piece that outlines her hopes for the university administration’s response to our unionization efforts. Read the story of Joo-Young Lee, a former UW postdoc who dealt with the sudden termination of his position and wants to help other postdocs by forming a postdoc union. Read about the story of a postdoc who dealt with pregnancy discrimination in science here.

Where will the extra compensation come from? Many PIs, especially young ones, are struggling with obtaining funding. Requiring them to pay more to postdocs would really put the squeeze on them, especially since postdoc minimum salaries were already raised last year. Would it come from the department? Should the NIH give out larger grants?

powabiatch

Brian: This is a really important question that unfortunately does not have a simple answer that covers everything. Firstly, I want to clarify that the NIH NRSA guidelines ended up not being a part of the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), although several universities (including the UW) increased the salaries for postdocs anyway (although, the increased rates are not guaranteed for postdocs hired since then). When this happened, the Office of the Provost said they would provide funding for PIs who could not afford it given their current grants, demonstrating that the university can step in to help smaller groups.
That being said, the NRSA guidelines are not contractually guaranteed minimums, and we know that some postdocs at the UW are paid below the guidelines.

Postdocs are crucial to carrying out the research mission of the UW. Ensuring adequate compensation is in the interest of the university as a whole and there are a lot of ways to address it. The specific form that solution will take will be determined by both postdocs and the administration during collective bargaining, but we know of a few possibilities, including shifting some overhead to cover any salary increases, building scheduled raises into new grant applications, using a larger fraction of awarded funds as direct costs as opposed to indirect costs, and more.

I believe that good working conditions lead to better research. Seattle is an expensive place, and postdoc compensation needs to reflect that if we want research groups at the UW to be able to attract talented people.

I'm a UW faculty member and I agree that postdocs are sadly not treated well. Our grad student union is pretty strong. Efforts to unionize faculty are difficult. Do you think that you can accomplish this before faculty unionizing occurs?

Hi u/piakus thanks for your question! It's great to hear from faculty, so thanks for being so engaged. Carolyn responding here. In 2015 the faculty tried to unionize at UW. However, they were unsuccessful and weren’t able to file a petition with the state labor board (PERC). The UW Postdoc Union has successfully filed a petition with PERC, and so we will be having an election on our union some time in the coming weeks. The unionization of postdocs at a university does not depend on the faculty at the school also being organized (see University of California postdocs, for example). Of course we are supportive of all groups of employees, everywhere, organizing.

Any plans to expand the unionization effort beyond UW?

Keep up the good work. As a postdoc myself, this effort is critical to our future. The idea that we are "in training" is consistently used to justify low wages and poor benefits. Meanwhile, we are pitted against each other in competition for limited job opportunities. Time to work together to advocate for working conditions and compensation that are commensurate with our training and expertise.

Hi there, fellow postdoc! Carolyn here. Thanks for your question. I agree that it is high time for postdocs to work together and try to improve our working conditions. We are postdocs at the UW trying to form a union for postdocs at the UW; we are doing this so we can negotiate a contract with our employer, the UW, through collective bargaining. We are communicating with our fellow postdocs at University of California schools, as they already have a postdoc union, and can provide feedback, knowledge, and expertise on what has worked well for them in their process of forming a union and eventually negotiating a contract with the administration. We support postdocs organizing everywhere. However, as Brian and I are (at least for now) postdocs at the UW we don’t have plans to become postdocs elsewhere and help organize in another postdoc union campaign.

What's the end goal? How worried are you that you'll all just be fired for trying to unionize?

Background info: I live in a right to when state where that happens all the time (unofficially, of course)

Eagleheardt
Hi, Brian here. Thanks for your question. Currently postdocs at the UW are at will employees who can be dismissed without cause at any time. That being said, now that we’ve filed with PERC, being dismissed as retaliation for organizing would be illegal (of course, we would have to be able to prove it). Thankfully, our advisers and the University Administration are separate entities and Admin tends to not interfere with how a particular faculty member runs their group. That kind of interference would be very unusual and raise a few red flags.

The end goal (from my perspective) is a structural change to how university policies are crafted. We think that having postdocs empowered to work with the admin to set the policies that affect them and shape the realities of their working conditions is the best way to ensure that our needs are being met.

I want to thank you for doing this. When I was an undergrad, some friends helped lead a union drive for the clerical and technical workers. The union corrected some ridiculous inequities like people who had been working at the university for 25 years making less than new hires.

My question for you is about post docs working excessively long hours. Some of that is pressure from supervisors, but much of it is coming from the general pressure to succeed that post docs feel. How do we shift both the rules and the culture to make working reasonable hours more the norm?

asbruckman

Brian here: This is a great question! Many postdocs are ambitious and vying for a small number of increasingly competitive jobs as professors at research universities. At the same time, many postdocs find that the number of hours worked each day and per week varies considerably depending on the science and “other stuff” (grant writing, paper writing, conferences, etc.) happening at the same time. Overall, we want to make sure that all postdocs – whether they are working 80 hour or 40 hour weeks – have access to mentorship, training, quality health care, a livable wage, visa support, etc. We strongly believe that ambitious postdocs should not be prevented from putting in extra time, but that other postdocs can work 40 hours a week and be supported and successful.

We are excited to see how negotiating a contract with the administration will impact the culture of overwork that is pervasive in many science labs. We hope to make the postdoc job more sustainable and less stressful (which leads to increased productivity) through obtaining a contract that works for all postdocs, regardless of whether or not they are extraordinarily ambitious.

How do you plan to address the structural reality of postdoc work (and grad student work, for that matter), which is that in some fields, there are simply fewer professor spots compared with the number of people trained for them? How can unionizing possibly be a solution for what is a structural problem in the postdoc career path?

anon_feeltheburn

Brian: We are committed to forming a postdoc union to have fair compensation, excellent working conditions, and to make our postdoc appointments respected positions in their own right. While there are more postdocs than available professor positions, we are certain that having a postdoc union will allow us to perform better research and therefore pursue a wide variety of career options. One way to do this might be to expand career development opportunities to include more training for career paths other than tenure-track faculty at a research university by, for instance, guaranteeing funding for the postdoc association and the office of postdoctoral affairs. Unionizing does not have to be a response to structural problems, but it can guarantee that we are treated fairly along our career paths.
Hi guys!

Working at a few different institutions, I've noticed that every place seems to treat students in a different way. Some places treat postdocs as older students, while others as technical staff, and many steps and mixes in between. What do you think is the most appropriate way to categorize PDFs and how might this be standardized?

superhelical

Hi there, thanks for your interesting question u/superhelical. Carolyn here. First, let's look at the NIH, NPA, NSF and UW Office of Postdoctoral Affairs definition: A postdoc is an individual who has received a doctoral degree (or equivalent) and is engaged in a temporary and defined period of mentored advanced training to enhance the professional skills and research independence needed to pursue his or her chosen career path.

So a postdoc is not a student, but rather, a trainee. I have been a member of several labs myself, and it seems that the differential treatment of postdocs also plays out on a lab-by-lab scale, as well as an institutional scale. Based on the “official” definition above and my experiences in various labs, I think we should treat postdocs as early career investigators who are on their way to independence, as this is currently the framework in which postdocs are hired (i.e. they are hired with the goal of starting their own lab in mind). In this way, I think that postdocs will still receive training in certain areas and will perform technical work that may often be performed by staff scientists.

What power do you think you'll gain from your union? You envisage the threat of a post doc strike will be taken seriously?

Spazzmoid

Hi, u/Spazzmoid thanks for your question. Carolyn here. First, by forming a union we, the postdocs, will have more rights and more power. This happens first from gaining the ability to bargain collectively on a contract. This allows us to speak with a unified and representative voice to advocate for ideas we care most about, like ensuring fair compensation, healthcare benefits, and ending workplace discrimination. This process of collective bargaining gives us the power to negotiate as equals with the university administration.

Second, if the university does not bargain in good faith, striking is an option that we can explore. In this scenario, postdocs will collectively and democratically decide on how that would take place. In the UC system, the threat of striking was taken very seriously (65% voted yes to strike in 2016) and we will work collectively and democratically to take the best steps possible in relation to a strike.

Besides collective bargaining, another way that unionization provides more power to postdocs is the ability to influence policy on the state and national stage. When we stand together in a union, we can advocate for more state and federal funding for the university and for research funding in general. We can work with faculty and administration and legislators to shape policy that impacts science research, workplace rights, and education funding.

Pre-admission: this is less a question than bait to draw out a topic I know to be important to young academics.

What responsibilities, if any, do you think a university (or a postdoc union) should have wrt child care? Paid parental leave? Guaranteed slots at affordable day cares? I am under the impression that lack of child care is a huge problem for young women scientists and represents one of the leaks in the “pipeline” and is one of the factors contributing to underrepresentation of women in academia (and I
see 'gender equity' in the opening post).

**stillnotelf**

Thanks for your question u/stillnotelf, Carolyn responding. Gender equity is a huge issue within the research community. Personally I think important areas to improve upon are parental leave and childcare. With a union, we could bargain with the university over paid parental leave, subsidized childcare and access to on-site daycare facilities. UAW 4121, the union representing UW academic student employees (including grad students) has already successfully bargained over these issues. They were able to secure $900 every quarter (every three months) in subsidized childcare. The University of California postdoc union (UAW 5810) negotiated four weeks of paid parental leave (UAW 5810 paid parental leave contract: [http://uaw5810.org/know-your-rights/contract/#article12](http://uaw5810.org/know-your-rights/contract/#article12)). As it stands, all postdocs who’ve been postdocs at the UW for at least a year can take unpaid Family Medical Leave, and we are often last in line for the on-campus childcare (and anecdotally, there are years-long waiting lists for these childcare sites). As the average age of postdocs is 30+ and many postdocs stay in their positions for more than two-years, it’s reasonable to think that many postdocs will start families during their time at the UW. If it’s financially or practically impossible to do so, we are necessarily excluding people from staying in academic science, and I think that’s a serious problem. We hope that by addressing these issues (parental leave and daycare) we will be able to create a more inclusive, equitable and diverse research environment.

What do you think fair wages would be for your typical post-doc who has just finished their PhD?

**011111111110OOi11**

Hi there! Great question. Carolyn here :) The salary for UW postdocs will be determined through our contract, and that’s up to UW postdocs to collectively determine. We are inspired by UC’s postdocs ability to get every postdoc on the NIH guidelines plus two years of experience. ([http://uaw5810.org/know-your-rights/contract/#article4](http://uaw5810.org/know-your-rights/contract/#article4)) There are many UW postdocs below the NIH guidelines, and we believe that having every postdoc to at least the guidelines would help us perform even better research than we’re currently performing. In addition to getting all postdocs up to this minimum, many of us (myself included) are interested in trying to improve upon this minimum. Seattle is an expensive city (apparently, the 9th most expensive in the world [http://www.king5.com/money/seattle-9th-most-expensive-rent-in-the-world/408838426], and the price of living is quite high even compared to many cities/towns where other postdocs work.

Have you noticed a trend in wages and dissatisfaction among postdocs according to their area of research? Surely, the people who research the big ticket items aren’t struggling as much as a more unheard of field.

**PetetheFaxMachine**

Hi! Thanks for asking a question u/PetetheFaxMachine, Carolyn responding. It’s true that some departments do tend to pay their postdocs more (or less) than others; the computer science department at UW, for example, tends to pay postdocs significantly more. However, there are issues that affect postdocs in every department and research area regardless of their salary. For example, postdocs don’t have actual contracts nor do we have a grievance process to address sexual harassment. More generally, based on hundreds of conversations during our card-signing campaign and the results of an initial survey conducted during this time, we’ve found there are three top issues that postdocs from all departments would like to see action on in our first contract: compensation, parental leave and visas. These are important issues to postdocs from all departments, including computer science :)

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**WE'RE FORMING A POSTDOC UNION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON, ASK US ANYTHING! : REDDIT**

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As someone who will (hopefully) get his PhD soon and would prefer to stay as a researcher in the academic field, my number one concern is job security, with most post-docs that I know working on 1-year, or at best 2-year contracts. Do you have any plans to demand the creation of longer-term, or even permanent, post-doc level positions?

**Vova_Poutine**

Brian: Hi **u/Vova_Poutine**, job security is an important issue, thanks for your question! At UW, postdocs are typically hired with one-year appointments — appointments that can be unilaterally changed at any time and are **not** contracts. Unionized postdocs at the University of California negotiated for two-year contracts, and we think that pursuing the same at UW would be a great development. In addition to job-security improvements, two-year minimum terms allow international postdocs to apply for and obtain longer J-1 visas, so they don't have to return to their country of origin for visa renewal as frequently (a process that can take a month or longer!). Furthermore, by having a postdoc union, we could ensure that no postdoc is unfairly disciplined or dismissed arbitrarily. We think we will have more job security, more time to dedicate to research, and ultimately fairer treatment for all scientists in academia.

Hey! This is my first Reddit post! How exciting for me! As a former UW postdoc (current staff member), I know there are so many different postdoc titles (incl. pseudo-faculty titles), statuses and levels of pay/benefits/support at UW. I remember how much my heart sank the day I realized I'd be losing my postdoc retirement benefits, for example. Which levels/titles of postdoc at the UW do you envision joining the union and being covered by it? All? Only some? Also, what about postdocs who want to pursue non-traditional careers? Should they be included, or do you envision the union as a kind of pre-faculty organization? Thanks!

**kiri-kin-tha**

Hi **u/kiri-kin-tha**! Yay, good choice for a first-time Reddit post ;) Carolyn here. The petition we filed with the state labor board included every job title at the UW that includes postdocs who fit the NIH (and NSF, NPA and Office of Postdoctoral Affairs at the UW) definition of a postdoc. You are right that there are many job titles that include postdocs at the UW, and this sort of grab-bag of titles is seen at other universities with postdocs. Personally, I would be interested in trying to unify the job titles and job codes for postdocs and perhaps this is something that we can make progress on in our first contract.

What powers would a postdoc union, or a university, have to address the “international workers’ protections” point in the opening post? Isn't it basically all under the control of the federal government? (It certainly seems the current government would be inimical to any policy change that would increase protections for anyone international).

**stillnotelf**

Hi **u/stillnotelf**, great question. Carolyn here. With a union, we'd gain the ability to negotiate over working conditions that directly affect visas and international rights. In addition, we could also gain a broader base of political power to address international issues that affect postdocs at the UW. UAW 4121 (the union representing UW academic student employees) was a participant in the amicus brief used by the state of Washington’s federal court to overturn Trump’s infamous Travel Ban, demonstrating a union’s ability to leverage political power.

On university campuses, visas lengths are tied to appointment lengths. Therefore, if we could guarantee longer appointment lengths, then we could in turn guarantee longer visas. For example, a
three year contract given to a postdoc could result in a three year visa, instead of a one year contract and a one year visa. Furthermore, by having strong discipline and dismissal clauses in a collective bargaining agreement, we could ensure that no international postdoc is unfairly terminated and therefore forced to leave the US. We’re confident that a postdoc union can directly address the rights and interests of international postdocs through working in some of the ways I’ve highlighted here.

The basic strategy that Unions have to achieve their objectives is by artificially reducing the supply of workers. Less post-docs/same funds ==> more money per researcher. Of course doing this in the academia would open a can of Worms.

What do you think about this?

lucaxx85

Hi there! Thanks for your question. Carolyn here! One might argue that if the goal of a postdoc is to become an independent investigator/professor within academia there are too many postdocs: a very large percentage of postdocs don’t go on to become professors (https://www.nap.edu/read/18982/chapter/6#58). However, another viewpoint is that a postdoc position is a worthwhile job to have regardless of the job attained after the postdoc.

We are interested in positively impacting the working conditions of researchers who are postdocs now. We think that better working conditions means better research, and this is our main concern.

One last factoid to keep in mind: When the UC postdoc union formed, there were about 5800 postdocs in the UC system. Now, there are ~7000 postdocs. So, at least in the most comparable example we have, when postdocs unionized the number of postdocs did not decrease, but rather increased.