



# Graduate Teaching Fellows Federation

American Federation of Teachers, Local 3544, AFL-CIO

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**Date:** February 13, 2019

**From:** The Executive Board of the Graduate Teaching Fellows Federation

**To:** The University of Oregon Senate

We members of the Graduate Teaching Fellows Federation write in response to the proposed “Academic Continuity Plan” put before the UO Senate. While we recognize the need to prepare for unforeseen and uncontrollable disruptions to university operations, we strongly oppose the proposed policy because it conflates labor actions by employee groups with natural disasters, painting the university as powerless in preventing such disruptions; it runs afoul of the basic principles of labor relations and erodes confidence in the university’s commitment to collective bargaining; and the implications of a faculty endorsement of this policy are far-reaching and troubling.

First, labor actions by employee groups are not in the same category of events as natural disasters, epidemics, or other unforeseen and uncontrollable disruptions. Strikes and things like it are not forces of nature, totally removed from any possible interjection or control by the university. The university can always end a labor action immediately by reaching a reasonable compromise with its employees. This is especially true in the case of a strike, where legal timelines mandate multiple months of good-faith negotiations followed by mediation, impasse, and a 30-day cooling-off period. At any of these stages the university has the option to ward off the potential disruption of a labor action by addressing employee needs through a reasonable contract settlement. Put simply, the power to avert a disruptive labor action is always within the university’s hands, and it is disingenuous for the university to lump such disruptions in with truly unforeseeable and unpreventable events like natural disasters or epidemics.

In addition, the proposed policy has the effect of circumnavigating the provisions contained in multiple employee collective bargaining agreements by pressuring one employee group to fulfill the duties and labor of another in the event of a labor action. While the policy does not contain a strict requirement for faculty to perform GE labor, in practice faculty will be pressured to perform labor beyond the scope of their collective bargaining agreement and individual employment contracts for fear of reprisal. This requirement thus contravenes both the spirit and content of both the GTFF and UAUO collective bargaining agreements. Such a policy would be patently ridiculous if it applied to another employee group, such as classified staff or the UO police, requiring GEs or faculty to take on tasks of campus security or administration in the event of a strike. The principle at work in this policy is just as unreasonable, and can only have the consequence of eroding confidence in the university's commitment to collective bargaining and fair labor relations.

Finally, GTFF would like to ask the members of the Senate to consider the following questions before making a decision on this proposed policy:

- You are being asked to endorse a policy explicitly designed to undermine the collective bargaining power of other employee groups to negotiate a fair contract and to exercise some control over the conditions of their employment.
- You are being asked to endorse a policy that encourages you to serve as strikebreakers against other employees at UO should those employees democratically decide that it is necessary to withhold their labor in order to achieve a fair contract from the university.

- What signal does the introduction of this policy proposal, or its endorsement by the Senate, send while the GTFF is actively engaged in contract negotiations with the university?
- What are potential ramifications of an endorsement on relations between different employee groups at UO and in the wider community?
  - How should your colleagues across campus interpret such an endorsement?
  - What impact would an endorsement have on the trust and solidarity between employee groups on campus? Between graduate students and faculty?
- What impacts would this policy, or an endorsement of it by the Senate, have on the future ability of faculty members and UAUO to successfully engage in direct, collective action over their own pay, benefits, or working conditions?

In conclusion, we emphasize that the GTFF has no plans or intentions to strike. We are bargaining in good faith with the university to reach a fair agreement and will continue to do so. Of course, we reserve the right to engage in concerted, collective action, up to and including striking, if our members feel the university is unwilling to offer a fair contract. However, this proposal coming in the context of a bargaining year signals to us that the university is interested in disempowering graduate employees from their ability to settle a fair agreement. In the context of continued attacks on public education across the US, unionization efforts by faculty, grad employees, and staff at universities and colleges, and labor disputes in K-12 school districts and higher education institutions -- we ask the Senate to consider carefully whether this policy -- as written -- is an appropriate policy; whether labor disputes and natural disasters are comparable events demanding identical responses, and whether it is in the interest of the university community for the University Senate to endorse a plan clearly designed to weaken campus unions and drive a wedge between employee groups on campus.

We urge you to reject the current policy as presented, and to consider revisions that can achieve the commendable goal of preparing for unforeseen and uncontrollable disruptions to university operations without eroding the collective bargaining process and collective bargaining agreements of multiple employee groups on campus.

Sincerely,

The Executive Board of the Graduate Teaching Fellows Federation