

From the chapter president

Getting down to business



*Alan Wang
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We have now been over 18 months into a global pandemic that at its start changed everyone’s operating procedures to something other than “normal.” Classes and meetings have gone from in-person to virtual and now back to in-person. Despite an ongoing global pandemic and a new variant (Delta) that spreads far more rapidly, we seem to be approaching that “normal.” Near the beginning of the semester when it quickly became apparent that case numbers were rising, UUP met with management and asked for more robust testing measures for the campus community and a continuance of safety measures such as masking, enhanced cleaning of high traffic areas, easily accessible hand sanitizer, and portable air filtration systems for those classrooms that have less/lower natural airflow or are not supplied by a central air system with proper air filters.

UUP has also been working to keep members informed of their rights and protections, including a number of workshops and town hall sessions



JONATHAN COHEN

throughout the semester that allowed members to voice their concerns in an open forum to the chapter leadership. Furthermore, UUP continues to meet monthly with administration at our joint labor/management meetings to make administration aware of concerns that we hear from our membership and make sure administration carries out a reasonable plan of action to resolve any problems. One point in particular that *continued on page 2*

CONTENTS December 2021 No. 101

State of the Union.....	3
A conversation with your Labor Relations Specialist.....	4
300 Days of Resistance	6

Connection

Binghamton Chapter newsletter

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The opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the authors or of the Binghamton Chapter and are not necessarily the opinions of United University Professions.

The editor welcomes letters and other comments of interest to the Binghamton Chapter.

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continued from page 1

we drove home early in the semester had to do with the administration requiring COVID volunteer hours from professional staff.

We made it clear that if a professional is asked to perform additional duties due to COVID that are above and beyond their contractual workload, some form of compensation needs to be offered.

On another note, an Individual Development Award (IDA) is once again available to UUP-

represented employees who engage in activities to further their professional development. For this year, individuals can apply and receive up to \$2000 in funding either all at once or the funding can be split between two projects. Funding may be used to enhance teaching, research capabilities, professional knowledge and skills. Keep your eyes open for an email that will contain additional information.

Finally, after a somewhat rough start to the semester, things seem to have settled down. However, as the current contract expires on July 1, 2022, operations are quickly ramping up to gather information and concerns for our contract negotiations team

which will soon be sitting down at the table with the State to negotiate a new contract. During the last few weeks, we have given our membership several

"... through all the pain, stress, uncertainty, and fatigue, our members continue to work diligently and efficiently to make sure Binghamton University remains operational. Congratulations to all of you!"

opportunities to meet with Bret Benjamin, the statewide chief negotiator, and Elizabeth Hough, counsel to the UUP statewide president, to voice their concerns and suggestions for the upcoming contract. If you missed these meetings, and still have concerns or suggestions you would like to voice,

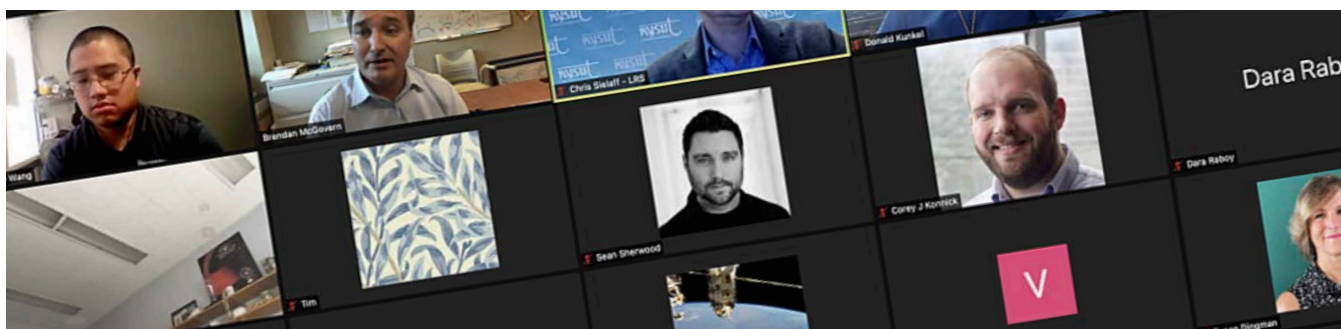
you can send these to the statewide negotiations team email at **contract@uupmail.org**.

In closing, I would like to emphasize that through all the pain, stress, uncertainty, and fatigue, our members continue to work diligently and efficiently to make sure Binghamton University remains operational. Congratulations to all of you! I would also like to thank my fellow chapter officers, our chapter executive board, our department representatives, and our chapter assistant, Linda O'Branski, for their continued support and hard work throughout this semester.



JONATHAN COHEN

• THE STATE OF THE UNION •



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COVID has impacted everyone in different ways. Here at Binghamton University, it is fair to say that a vast majority of community members — administration, academics, professionals, students and others – worked hard to keep the University functioning during this pandemic. As a community, we should be proud of what we have accomplished during this very trying time.

Unfortunately, the challenges presented by COVID have not always been handled smoothly. Such was the case when, on September 13, President Harvey Stenger issued a message via Dateline Addition concerning volunteer services related to COVID. In that message, administration stated that “we have worked with both UUP and CSEA to create” a plan whereby almost all staff were required to sign up for a bi-weekly shift for the remainder of the fall semester. This implied that the terms laid out in the message had been negotiated and agreed to by the parties concerned. That was not the case.

The communique generated an immediate response from a significant number of UUP members, especially professional staff, who felt somewhat blind-sided. The UUP Binghamton Chapter Executive Board immediately responded with a resolution sent to membership that stated: "We refute the administration’s claim that UUP was involved in this decision and express our serious concerns over the continued use of forced “volunteerism” by primarily our professional members to compensate for inadequate planning. All of our members' rights need to be respected at all times.” The Professional Staff Senate (PSS) also responded with a

September 23 letter to the Administration that said: “You have cited the Professional Staff Senate (PSS) as a line of communication so that you are aware of how staff are doing and how administrative actions are being perceived. We take this role seriously, and **we want to make sure you are fully aware that the implementation of the COVID support mandate and handling of the telecommuting agreement were deleterious to employee morale and have eroded their trust in the administration.**”

At an October 29 Professional Concerns Meeting, over 200 staff participated to express frustration with both the rollout of the COVID volunteer hours policy and telecommuting initiatives. We also received emails and other outreach from staff. There is no question that administration’s memo on volunteer hours as well as issues surrounding telecommuting damaged both employee morale and trust and will require additional work to be repaired.

Survey results from that meeting clearly point to the damage. Three questions were asked.

1. Have you considered leaving Binghamton University due to your current work environment?
61% responded YES
2. Are your current duties and responsibilities accurately reflected in your Performance Program?
43% responded NO
3. Within your Department/Area, how do you gauge the current morale?
53% responded LOW and 30% responded VERY LOW

These results are troubling and point to a need for continued efforts to boost morale and strengthen the sense of trust needed for a positive work environment.

UUP hopes to continue to work with administration on all issues that impact staff. Currently there is a Faculty Advisor to the President. We have strongly encouraged administration to consider appointing a professional staff advisor or to reach out to the Chair of PSS for feedback on policy and communications that impact staff. We remain optimistic that as a community Binghamton University will meet the challenges that confront us.

Get to Know Your NYSUT Labor Relations Specialist (LRS): A Conversation with Chris Sielaff



*Conducted/Edited by Benita Roth
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UUP members are part of a larger labor movement, not just in spirit but in terms of organization. All of UUP is one “local” of New York State United Teachers (NYSUT), which in turn is a member organization of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), which then affiliates with the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (or AFL-CIO). That’s a lot of alphabet soup, and sometimes the other organizations seem like very distant relatives. But our parent union, NYSUT, gives us something very important to the running of the chapter – the Labor Relations Specialist, or LRS. The LRS is an expert on our Agreement with the State of New York (i.e. the contract) and we consult with our LRS virtually on a daily basis.

Binghamton’s LRS is Chris Sielaff, who is relatively new to our campus and completely indispensable to making sure we chapter officers defend our members’ rights. I thought it would be a good idea to get to know him a bit through an interview, and he graciously agreed. We conducted the interview over email, and here is the gently edited outcome.

UUP: Tell us a little bit about yourself and your path to becoming an LRS for NYSUT.

CS: I grew up in Brockport, New York. Both my parents were union members. My father was a Teamster and my mother was a NYSUT member. So, I grew up in a household where unions were discussed and we enjoyed the benefits of collective bargaining. Professionally, I served as a secondary social studies teacher at Binghamton City Schools for nearly 10 years. I became involved in union work very early in my career, when our contract was violated and I became involved in the grievance process. During my



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— Chris Sielaff, Binghamton’s Labor Relations Specialist (LRS).

teaching career I served as a building representative, delegate, grievance chair, vice president, and as a member of three contract negotiations teams; I was also a delegate to other labor organizations. After attending the National Education Association (NEA) labor relations training in 2019, I decided it was finally time to pursue a full-time career within the labor movement. For nearly a year, I served as an Organizer for the American Federation of Teachers assigned to UUP, and then I landed my dream job – to become a NYSUT Labor Relations Specialist. It is an honor and privilege

to serve in this capacity on behalf of UUP members.

UUP: What does an LRS do for UUP chapters?

CS: Primarily, I serve to protect the rights of UUP members and uphold the Agreement between UUP and the State of New York. The individual tasks that constitute this charge are numerous and diverse. I represent the interests of UUP, its Chapters and their members with management, whether they be from campus administration, SUNY or the State. As need arises, I represent UUP members if they are subjected to disciplinary interrogations and disciplinary charges. If a UUP

represented employee alleges their employer has violated the UUP Agreement, I assist them with grievance filing and procedures. One of my favorite duties is to lead workshops and training on a range of topics from professional

advancement to civility in the workplace. The best part of the job is interacting with UUP members and helping them solve their problems, small or large.

I work with over 4,000 UUP members spread among four SUNY campuses: Binghamton, Cortland, Delhi, and Oneonta. Each campus and its UUP chapter is unique. Campuses have their own culture, local policies, and established local practices. Their chapter leaders are different and each have their own set of priorities and interests. My counterparts in

continued on page 5

continued from page 4

management are also vastly different; some prefer to compromise and collaborate while others live strictly by “the book.” The unique nature of each campus makes my professional life interesting, challenging, and engaging.

UUP: What attracted you to doing the work you do as an LRS? What are the most important things you do in your job?

CS: Becoming an LRS is my dream job because I have a passion for helping people. One of my core values is to respect all workers and value labor in all forms. Being an LRS has afforded me the opportunity to embody these values every day.

The idea of holding an employer true to the written word is an incredibly powerful concept to me personally. So, when I have the opportunity to ensure a UUP member has their right to due process respected in accordance with the UUP Agreement, I do it not just because it is my job, but also because it is part of my core system of values.

In the eleven months that I have been an LRS, I have had the opportunity to assist UUP members in preserving their health benefits, to ensure better safety in their workplace, to receive adequate pay for their labor, and more. It is not always easy or efficient work, but it is rewarding. There are challenges — obstacles and limitations which hinder UUP’s ability to act in certain situations. The law, campus policy, and even the UUP Agreement, at times can prevent UUP and me as its representative from taking certain actions. However, I have found that most UUP members, first and foremost, want to be heard. The fact that their union and its representative have taken the time to listen and analyze the situation in an honest effort to find a solution means more to them than the actual outcome. That is the silver lining of such situations.

UUP: What are the most common things that you as an LRS are asked about? What would be the best advice you could give to our members re: coming to talk to you/chapter officers about a problem?

CS: The most common questions I get at the present moment are tied to our current context: COVID-19 and the effect it is having on our lives and work. Telecommuting, concerns over ADA requests, sick leave, policies relating to childcare while a minor is under quarantine, teaching modality, workplace health and safety — these are topics I deal with on a daily basis.

“The work will be waiting for you when you return.”

Underneath COVID concerns are all of the normal workplace issues that arise in any professional setting: collegiality/bullying/harassment, interpersonal conflict, performance concerns including evaluations, parental leave, workload issues, and the list goes on. My best advice for any UUP member who intends to raise an issue with their chapter leaders follows.

Prepare a summary of the issue (key points). When you reach out to a chapter leader, the more efficiently you can communicate the issue, the sooner we all can act to address your concerns.

Have your documentation in hand. If you have workload concerns and you are a professional, you should be ready with a copy of your performance program. If your question relates to your essential duties, you may need to reference your state title or other information found on your appointment letter. Many issues brought forward to UUP involve communication between various parties; save the relevant communication as a PDF or other file for easy sharing.

Understand that your chapter leaders and its representative are going to do whatever they can to help you, but there is no magic wand or “fix it” button. Most issues take time to work through and resolve. Most of the time

UUP can arrive at a resolution with which the affected UUP member is happy.

UUP: Finally, what do you think are the biggest challenges that our members face in the coming years?

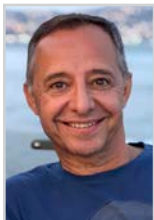
CS: This is a difficult question to grapple with, but I will give it a shot. On a local level, efforts to increase efficiency and profitability will stress the workloads of many UUP members. Budgets will continuously be in a real or imagined state of peril and this will be used as a justification for job loss (primarily through attrition or “reorganization”) and expanded workloads. UUP members must remain vigilant in protecting their workload and this vigilance may involve uncomfortable conversations with supervisors. When it comes to maintaining work-life balance, each member is their own best first responder. UUP is here to support and advise, but most successful advocacy will take place between each employee and their supervisor.

In our country we have a toxic work culture. People live to work and define their lives around their careers. It is not a bad thing to take pride in your professional accomplishments. However, the number of UUP members whose scales of work and life are definitively tipped in favor of their employer is unhealthy. Sadly, much of this is self-directed. My best advice is to turn your Outlook/B-Mail notifications off, stop responding to work emails and texts outside of the hours of your normal obligation, and invest that time and energy into your personal life, your family, your hobbies and anything else that makes you happy. The work will be waiting for you when you return.

Some wise words there. Thanks to Chris for his time and his calling; we are all the better for all his efforts.



Bogazici University vs. Erdogan: 300 Days of Resistance



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Bogazici University in Istanbul has been one of the longest lasting international partners of Binghamton University. Since the early 1980s, there has been a steady flow of faculty and hundreds of graduate and undergraduate students from Bogazici to Binghamton, and to a lesser degree from Binghamton to Bogazici. Considered as the most prestigious public university in Turkey, Bogazici University was established in 1863 as Robert College, the first American university founded outside the United States. In 1971, it became a public university. The university is well known for its unusually liberal culture and environment, making it a target for the religious conservatives led by Turkey's President Erdogan.

Traditionally university rectors in Turkey are elected by the faculty.

However, Erdogan claimed the right to appoint university rectors after a failed military coup in 2016. The protests at Bogazici started in January 2021 when Erdogan, by decree, appointed Melih Bulu, not a member of the faculty, as the rector of Bogazici University. This was seen as a blatant attack by the government on academic freedom by the faculty and the students of Bogazici. Along with numerous student-led protests that were violently interrupted by police, for months, in the rain and even in the snow, the faculty of Bogazici in academic regalia protested with their backs turned toward the office of the rector. Even though the student protests resulted in the detention of some students, the faculty protests continued uninterrupted. Some of the LGBTQ students were arrested because they were displaying LGBTQ artwork and carrying pride flags, leading to calls for larger protests with the inclusion of labor unions and other parties. These protests were banned and the university's main entrance was sealed and another twelve students were arrested.

The faculty's silent protest continued daily, with strong support from the alumni and the students. In July 2021, to everybody's surprise, including the appointed rector Bulu, Erdogan buckled and removed Bulu, by decree again, and appointed, by decree, Bulu's deputy, Naci Inci, as interim rector. Rumor has it that Bulu's shady academic record with numerous instances of plagiarism played a significant role in his dismissal. Some of the alumni of Bogazici are still pursuing disciplinary action against Bulu for plagiarizing in his dissertation.

Ordinarily, the unfolding of the events would be considered as a victory by the protesters, particularly the faculty. However, the appointment of the deputy rector was not well received by the faculty and the students. An election held by the faculty for a new rector was completely ignored by the government. Furthermore, the interim rector took a hard stance against the protestors. A respected faculty member was fired and the rector filed a complaint with the police against fourteen protesting students. Two of those students are currently in prison. With no end in sight for the "interim" rector's tenure, the protests continue.

As his government's future is in serious doubt, Erdogan continues his bashing of academics, intellectuals, and the LGBTQ community in Turkey, not unlike what is happening in Brazil, Russia, Hungary, and Poland. The fight for academic freedom at Bogazici is a reflection of larger political, cultural, class, and economic struggles in Turkey. November 5 marked the 300th day of resistance at Bogazici. In solidarity with the faculty and students, alumni and parents joined in the protests on that day. Surprisingly, there was no intervention by the police. Regardless, many in Turkey and abroad see these protests rattling the power of Erdogan; a first victory, albeit small, for civil disobedience against the strongman of Turkey.

