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# Gen Z is driving a wave of unionization on college campuses – and employers should pay attention

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Thomas Gross has been living paycheck to paycheck working as a grill cook at Northeastern University's dining hall since 2017. He lives with several family members in the Boston neighborhood of Roxbury, where rents are increasing. But life is about to get more comfortable for Gross, following a union contract victory that increases Northeastern dining workers' hourly pay by \$9.32 over the next 4.5 years.

Gross, who will be making more than \$30 per hour by early 2026, in addition to other union members and leaders interviewed by *The Business Journals*, said student support was critical to landing the contract.



UNITE HERE LOCAL 26

More than 60 Northeastern University student groups formed a coalition called "Huskies Organizing with Labor," which held rallies in support of campus dining workers seeking an improved contract.

“The students took the time to have meetings at 8 p.m. and 9 p.m. to (learn) how they should support us,” Gross said. “They did rallies, marches and also sent a letter to the president of the school, to show that 68 student organizations supported us in our fight.”

The collaboration between workers and students in the contract fight at Northeastern is currently playing out on college campuses across the country, and is largely being driven by Generation Z. People born between 1997 and 2012 view unions more favorably than any other age group and are unafraid to fight for change on their campuses and in their workplaces, according to new research from the Center for American Progress. Just look at Starbucks.

That means that colleges and employers alike aiming to recruit a shrinking pool of young people (due to birth declines following the 2008 financial crisis), face a growing dilemma as they balance the need to appeal to Gen Z while keeping personnel expenses in check.

## **Gen Z embraces unions**

The Covid-19 pandemic empowered workers to seek better working conditions. Frontline workers, including many college campus workers, were especially frustrated and burned out after workloads and health risks increased during the pandemic while wages stagnated or fell, said Kate Bronfenbrenner, Director of Labor Education Research and a Senior Lecturer at Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations. Most colleges laid off or furloughed non-instructional staff to fill budget gaps in 2020 as enrollments plummeted. Unionized workers were largely spared from pay cuts, though, because of their contracts.

“It got people to think, ‘Wait a minute, if you have a union contract, the employer can't just do things arbitrarily,’” Bronfenbrenner said. University workers also made “the discovery that they were making all these sacrifices while the university actually profited. There was the sense of, ‘We're putting ourselves out there to help the students at this moment of crisis and the universities aren't appreciating us.’”

Gen Zers, for their part, entered college or the workforce during a tumultuous period and, as a result, they have major concerns about

the state of the world, according to Deloitte's 2022 Gen Z and Millennial Survey. Deloitte said that young people are pushing employers to tackle issues like climate change and the nation's growing wealth gap to "make a positive societal impact." Less than half of Gen Zs agree that "business is having a positive impact on society, marking the fifth consecutive year this percentage has dropped," Deloitte reports.

"They see an unjust and dangerous world and they are feeling like they want to have control over some part of their lives," Bronfenbrenner said. "They are extremely engaged in the workforce."

At Northeastern, more than 60 Northeastern student groups formed a coalition called "Huskies Organizing with Labor," to help the campus workers who serve them meals.

"We believe that labor is the agent of change and through organizing the working class, we can bring about a better future for everyone," said Northeastern student Joshua Sisman. "By growing that solidarity between students and union members, (we are) helping to create that class consciousness and better conditions for everyone. It's just like very super key to our vision for the future."

Now, Northeastern union members and students are hoping to inspire workers employed by Chartwells Higher Education Dining Services, an operating sector of Compass Group North America that works with about 300 colleges, on other Boston-area campuses achieve better pay and work conditions. At Northeastern, more than half of the dining workers rely on housing assistance funds and many have experienced food insecurity, according to Unite Here Local 26.

Northeastern deferred to Chartwells when *The Business Journals* reached out for comment. Chartwells spokeswoman Meredith Rosenberg said the Charlotte, N.C.-based company "is pleased to have reached an agreement with Unite HERE Local 26 that provides enhanced wages and benefits for our associates."

"This new contract affirms our ongoing commitment to the overall well-being of our talented team members," Rosenberg said. "We

are grateful for our workers and their contributions to serving the Northeastern campus community. We look forward to an ongoing productive relationship with our talented associates and their Unite Here, Local 26 representatives.”

### **'It's contagious'**

Those following union trends on college campuses expect labor organization efforts to continue, especially among graduate students who teach classes, underpaid adjunct professors and undergraduate student workers, such as resident advisors. From 2013 to 2019, there were 16 newly recognized graduate student employee collective bargaining units in the country, totaling 19,627 new members, according to the National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions at Hunter College in New York, N.Y., (the most recent data available). William A. Herbert, distinguished lecturer and executive director of the center at Hunter College, said that his center has not yet finished analyzing the data for the last few years but confirmed that campus organization efforts continue to spread.

Most of the total work stoppages last year in the U.S. were in the manufacturing and educational services industries. Demands included pay, health and safety, Covid-19 protocols and more, according to research from The Worker Institute at Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations.

“All employers should be thinking about (the union activity),” Bronfenbrenner said. “Workers are angry. They feel like they have been working harder than ever and wages are stagnating. They want wage transparency and control over their jobs, and they're turning to unions to rectify this.”

*The Business Journals* requested several interviews with college administrators experiencing organizing efforts on their campuses to understand how schools are reacting to union growth, but none made officials available for interview. Northwestern University, Mount Holyoke College and University of California Office of the President sent written statements while the rest (Boston University; Clark University and Northeastern University) declined to comment or did not respond.

Like Northeastern students, Mount Holyoke College students also supported campus dining and facilities workers' contract fight with an online petition.

"Are you outraged at the fact that your "progressive" institution with a \$1 billion endowment pays its essential staff less than most restaurant chains? Let the administration know!" the petition read.

The Mount Holyoke workers also ratified their contract with the college last month, which included raises between 11.5% and 24.5%, according to MassLive.com.

"Mount Holyoke College values the contributions of all its employees," said college spokeswoman Christian Feuerstein. "We are grateful to everyone who played a role in this bargaining session and worked with us to start the semester with an uninterrupted focus on our scholarship, learning and community."

Resident advisors and other student workers are also organizing at several campuses — a subset that Bronfenbrenner predicts will continue to grow.

"Organizing is inspirational and it's contagious," Bronfenbrenner said. "So, when one group of workers organize, another group of workers organize."

Back at Northeastern, food service worker Angela Bello, and member of the bargaining committee, said in an interview that she hopes the dining workers' contract fight inspires workers at other colleges as contracts expire.

"We work for the same company so why don't they have the same benefits we have?" Bello said. "We do the same job. They have us as an example."

Bello, 53 and originally from the Dominican Republic, said that after more than 12 hours of final negotiations with Chartwells last month, she returned home and found a note in her refrigerator the following morning from one of her five children. The note, written in Spanish, translates to, "Mommy, congratulations. I am so proud of you, and you inspire me to fight and work harder all the time."

“That wakes up my soul,” Bello said. “That’s what I’ve tried to teach them.”

**Hilary Burns**

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