Introduction:

Reeves: This is the UW—Madison Campus Voices podcast; I’m Troy Reeves, head of the oral history program at the UW—Madison Archives and Records Management Services and today’s host.

This mini-movie describes the first Teaching Assistants’ Association, or TAA, Strike. It’s not only the classic struggle of labor v. management but also a generational battle between the Baby Boomers and the group Tom Brokaw called “The Greatest Generation.”

TAA Strike

For academics at UW—Madison, the title of TA offered a mark of honor, a training opportunity, and a means of financial support during their tenure at University. This is C. William Loomer, former professor of Agricultural Economics.

Loomer_TAshipIsAward

In May 1966, graduate students rebelled against one of their new responsibilities. Henry Haslach, a Mathematics TA, explained:

Haslach_UndergradsAndDraft

The graduate students soon acknowledged that they faced other problems as TAs, and re-organized as the Teaching Assistants’ Association on June 28, 1966. They quickly turned their attention to “bread and butter” issues, which Patricia Russian, a TA in the German Department, described:
The Association underwent fast political and ideological changes in its first years, but TAA membership exploded only after students learned about proposed legislation in the Wisconsin State Assembly. Henry Haslach:

Claiming over one thousand new members, the Association pressured the University to respond. Yet Chancellor H. Edwin Young, a former professor of Economics and director of the School for Workers, reluctantly agreed to work with the TAA only if TAs demonstrated their desire for representation through an election. With this election, the TAA gained a Structure Agreement that allowed the union to form a collective bargaining relationship with the University.

That summer and fall, bargaining was stalled primarily by the union’s call for educational reform, or educational planning, which cost the union support from faculty. Pat Russian:

The bargaining teams did not reach an agreement in 1969, and the TAA set a strike deadline for March 15th, 1970. In early March, TAA members voted to strike. This is Professor James Stern, a former member of the Industrial Relations Research Institute:
[Call/response from Stern clip:] Yet former Physics TA David Burress believed that educational reform encompassed job security as well as academic control:

**Burress_TAIsPatronage**

TAA members picketed campus during the weeks of the strike. Not all graduate students went on strike, and many other members of the University continued with their work during these weeks. Some who crossed picket lines complained that the TAs were abusive; TAA members also reported negative experiences on the picket lines. This is Pat Russian:

**Russian_AttacksOnPicketLines**

Despite the arrests of 2 TAs on March 24th, the strike continued throughout spring break.

Before the strike began, the TAA had requested mediation, which allowed the union and University to meet informally during the strike. The mediator and a representative of the TAA suggested that the contract could simply ignore educational reform; the University drafted such a proposal, but the Stewards’ Council of the TAA rejected it on March 30th and recommended that union members reject it at a forthcoming meeting.

The TAA faced greatly increased pressure following the Stewards’ Council’s rejection, but members met on April 5th, voting to reject the drafted contract already reviewed by the Stewards’ Council and to continue the strike.
Faculty from throughout the University met to discuss educational planning; their meeting extended into two days from April 6th to 7th, resulting in a drafted statement.

The University had no centralized method for determining whether TAs were still on strike. Nevertheless, administrators targeted individual TAs from four departments and physically confirmed that they were not in their classrooms during section meeting times. They then contacted the chairs of these TAs’ departments. One of these chairs was Morton Rothstein of the History Department:

Rothstein_AffidavitDesc

The next day, 21 students were served contempt citations for violating the injunction by continuing to strike.

At a meeting on April 8th, TAA members met to discuss whether to continue, escalate, or end the strike. Escalation could possibly entail physical force on picket lines or property damage; this option was strongly voted down by some union members. Lasting for over four hours, the meeting concluded with a vote to end the strike.

In the days that followed, some faculty and administrators reported isolated instances of vandalism to their homes.

Individual actions notwithstanding, the strike reached its end. Many throughout the University and state were uncertain as to whether the University or the TAA had won this conflict. Both sides seemed battle-weary and compromised. This is David Burress:

Burress_FeelingsAfterStrike

Professor Rothstein, in contrast, held a more positive view of the strike:
The strike ended with the first contract between a graduate student union and a university. TAA members accomplished something entirely new, and did so with little outside support. The Association has continued to provide graduate students with representation for more than four decades.

Thank you for listening to this mini-movie of the TAA strike of 1970. Check out our Campus Voices website for more information about this historic event in UW—Madison’s past. And return to the site this summer and beyond for more mini-movies on UW—Madison history.