

FRIDA GARZA

My Story



The annual salary at my first job in New York City was \$25,000/year—a figure that, by today’s standards, is well below minimum wage. At the time, though, I felt lucky to be getting paid at all. Right before I moved to the city, I was working as a freelance writer and living in my parents’ house in West Texas. My goal was to become a reporter: to use my research skills, my curiosity about others, and my passion for social justice to tell stories about women, immigrants, and other marginalized communities. After months of applying to full-time jobs, I was hired at a small but growing business news website based in New York City, and even though the company would not help me relocate, the idea that someone wanted to pay me to write about other people felt novel.

In a city as expensive as New York, it did not take long for the novelty to wear thin. I realized that I could not afford to live in the city on my salary and was expected to ask my parents for financial help. I left that job after less than a year, and found a new job, editing stories for a music and social justice website. This job was a better fit, and paid more—but I was classified as an independent contractor, meaning I was not eligible for health benefits or paid time off. These conditions—where bosses continually seek to cut costs—persist in the journalism industry today and privilege workers like me, who can rely on their parents for support. This system relies on workers internalizing a scarcity mindset, which I had done—and back in 2015, there was no industry-wide movement to challenge these conditions and campaign for pay equity or increasing the diversity in newsrooms.

Thankfully, that changed. In 2015, Gawker Media became the first digital media outlet to unionize under the Writers Guild of America, East, sparking a wave of unionization across the industry that is ongoing today. In 2017, I started working at Gawker (then called the Gizmodo Media Group, or GMG), and just a few months later, I joined the labor-management committee, which was in the middle of a campaign to stop management from laying off 30% of the newsroom. As excited as I was about working at a union shop, I was not entirely sure what the role of the union was, or the scope of things it could influence. That campaign would change everything for me: After months of internal escalation, management agreed not to lay off a single union member, and offered voluntary buyouts instead. The buyout included 18 weeks of severance, plus continuation of benefits—a new industry standard that has since been replicated by other WGAE shops. I could not go back to a service-model of unionism after that. I realized it was *workers* who had the power, and I became involved in various campaigns during my time at GMG, including heading up the diversity committee to improve working conditions for employees of color.

Today, as a Union Semester student, I see my goals as a labor organizer as similar to the goals I had when I started out as a journalist: uplifting the stories of women and people of color, struggling alongside them to change the status quo. At my internship at 1199SEIU Training and Employment Funds, I put those ideas into practice by helping my team collect data on frontline long-term care workers—a workforce that’s primarily made up of women of color, many of them from immigrant backgrounds. I want to continue to building on these experiences, and further combine my writing and activism skills with my interest in labor and social movements by applying to the Master of Arts in Labor Studies at the School of Labor and Urban Studies (SLU).

Pursuing a Master’s degree in Labor Studies at SLU would give me an opportunity to strengthen my research skills and apply the analytical and critical frameworks I am learning in class to real-life issues affecting today’s labor movement. It would allow me to dig deep into the issues that have piqued my interest as a union activist, especially those around the rise of precarious work in the US, and the downward effect that globalization can have on wages and job quality. Studying the labor movement in an academic setting would give me the historical and theoretical frameworks necessary to further investigate the effect of these capitalist forces on workers.

Although I have only been in the program for six weeks, I have enjoyed learning new historical and economic concepts in my Union Semester classes, especially in Labor History and in Labor and the Global Economy. In both of these classes, we will have the opportunity to research a topic of our choosing and write a final paper on said topic, and I am already excited about developing a research topic that will strengthen my understanding of how capitalist systems affect today’s labor market.

These classes have also had an impact on my life, allowing me to better step into my role as a union organizer for the Freelance Solidarity Project, a new division within the National Writers Union focused on freelance media workers. Learning about the move towards “flexible” work arrangements (subcontracting, temping, “on-call” work, and the misclassification of workers as self-employed) has made me more attuned to the issues facing my peers in the journalism world. The type of organizing that FSP is doing—converting freelance workers into union members, and imagining ways we could collectively bargain under current labor law—has not been attempted in the media industry before, and there is much that we are figuring out as we go along. But understanding the history of neoliberalism in the United States since the 1970s makes my work easier: It allows me to zoom out and see the issues affecting freelancers (and even their bosses) as systemic, and to visualize strategies that will lead to real, long-term change.

To that effect, over the last six months, I have been working to craft FSP’s brand and messaging, building both internal and external tools to educate members and non-members about our goals. This month, we plan to launch a Twitter account and a Discord workspace, where members can share documents and talk to each other. These tools, along with internal onboarding documents, have become crucial as we’ve grown our membership; today, we have 240 dues-paying members, up from 160 last December. As a member of the communications committee, I have also helped articulate our position on bills like California’s AB5, which aims to end the misclassification of gig

economy workers, and why it's important to support a similar bill being drafted by New York state legislators. (You can hear me talk more about FSP and AB5 on a [recent episode](#) of the Working People Podcast.)

I enjoy my work with FSP because I believe the labor movement must dedicate time to imagining (and attempting) alternative modes of worker organizing, and cannot afford to miss out on organizing precarious workers, of which there are more and more every day. So much work is already being done around the so-called gig economy (by

both researchers in academia and organizers in the field), and I believe that a Master's degree in Labor Studies would allow me to explore the range of approaches that unions, worker centers, and other worker organizations have taken over time. I have already gotten a taste of this through Union Semester: At 1199SEIU TEF, I have had the chance to hear from leaders in Cooperative Home Care Associates (CHCA) and Mondragón, and have become interested in learning more about how to build worker-owned cooperatives. In my Field Work class and my Work, Culture, and Politics class, we have been able to talk about these concepts in a group setting and explore their advantages and limitations.

Ultimately, I believe that pursuing a Master of Arts in Labor Studies at SLU would prepare me for a career in the labor movement, by equipping me with the historical context to tackle the biggest issues in today's labor movement. My time with the WGAE radicalized me, and changed the way I relate to myself, to my colleagues, and to the very concept of work. As a graduate student at SLU, I feel excited to grow as a writer, labor organizer, and researcher, and explore career opportunities that allow me to combine these skillsets.