

A SCIENCE WORKER ORGANIZING SCIENCE WORKERS

DR. NEAL T. SWEENEY

Interview by Mehmet Aslan and Erhan Nalçacı



We had a conversation with Dr. Sweeney, who is one of the leaders of Union of Postdocs and Academic Researchers (UAW) in the USA.

Thank you so much for accepting this interview offer Dr. Sweeney, would you like to start with describing your childhood? What kind of a family and environment you grew up in? Did you have a working class family, did you witness any struggles growing up?

I grew up near Detroit, Michigan in a basically middle class family. I was shaped by the environment – it was a very segregated city, so at a young age I became aware of systemic racism and how the Black community is oppressed. I also grew up during heightening de-industrialization of Detroit as the auto industry moved factories and jobs to other parts of the country, primarily the South, as well as to other countries. Detroit is also very international city, with large communities from Mexico, the Middle East, and elsewhere. My mother was a teacher and had a very strong sense of justice and that I believe shaped me from a young age as well.

What did motivate you to become a scientist, and a neuroscientist specifically?

During high school and during college I worked in research labs and found myself staying in the lab, late at night, talking to colleagues -- graduate students, Postdocs, faculty -- who were really motivating and interesting people, and we had a lot of great conversations. I really liked pursuing questions, thinking about the puzzle of how the brain solves a certain problem. I mostly worked on the visual system so we looked at questions like how is visual information processed, how does the reti-

na make connections to the brain throughout development, how those developmental processes help reveal fundamental mechanisms, and how developmental mechanisms could potentially be used to provide therapies for different diseases.

I read a lot of books by Stephen Jay Gould when I was younger; he had a dialectical approach to science and really connected science with political world and social justice. There are some other scientists in the same vein like Richard Lewontin that I also went on to read. Science is often presented as apolitical and some researchers are hesitant to take political action or even see the broader implications of our work but these writers, as well as some of my colleagues, helped me to connect with the larger political sphere of research and science fields.

Are you working as a scientist right now, or are you working on anything related to your field?

Right now I'm working as a union organizer. I helped start the first union for Postdocs about 10 years ago. And for about last four or five years I have been working as an organizer, working closely with scientists, and helping them to struggle for better rights, and win better working conditions.

Before getting into your work as a union organizer, would you like to describe the most important findings in your research?

For graduate school I went to UCSF (University of California San Francisco) and my research there was on genes that control how neurons grow and branch. I worked on fruit flies with different mutations in branching genes that control dendrites, the part of the neuron that receives information from other neurons. Different fly strains contained different mutations that caused problems in dendritic branching, for example one had too many branches and other had too few branches, and a third had branches that grew initially then contracted. I worked on one of these that caused excessive branching and we tried to understand what caused that and what parts of the cell function were altered to cause this excessive branching. Around the same time another group in Denmark was studying a family that had a mutation in their family that caused a kind of dementia (frontotemporal dementia) and it ended up being very closely related to the gene I was studying. This was a very interesting connection and has helped reveal what neuronal changes underlie this disease.

Most academics are working under hard circumstances, low pay, long working hours; would you like to describe the working conditions of scientists in the US, how it was for you, how it is for the people you organize with?

I have worked as a lab tech for several years, I was an undergraduate researcher, I was a graduate researcher, and I was a Postdoc in two different institutions. Through all this, it became clear to me that while a lot of people find the research fields as intellectually stimulating with a lot of freedom to study different topics, at the same time it was very exploitative. Institutional sexism and racism are prevalent, for example a recent study found sexual harassment in academia is only second to the military in the prevalence of harassment. Research assistants and Postdocs are kept in relatively low paid positions, they are pushed to work very hard and it's very difficult to get a permanent position, so little to no job security. I worked with many international researchers, and about 2/3s of the researchers in my union are international researchers. I quickly learned how visa holders face super-exploitation in terms of their visas being tied to their employment, so if they lose their job they have to find a job very quickly or they have to leave the country. Recently there have been racist attacks on Chinese researchers, and my union had a number of people from Iran and other countries who were stuck outside of the country from during the travel ban. Research fields are not always thought of as exploitative, but when you look at what the conditions are it became obvious to me and I wanted to help change it.

What do you think is the role of the academic institutions in these exploitative relations?

They need to do more. For example, after the recent visa bans and restrictions, a number of academic institutions initially took a position that you couldn't work if you are stuck outside of the country. After facing political pressure they changed this position, which shows they have some choice in how they interpret immigration policy. They are interpreting the law and the interpretation they take and the results will depend on the political push from the workers and students.

When did you become a union organizer for scientists?

I started as a postdoc at University of California-Santa Cruz around 2009 and at that point the union was basically just formed. It was a long struggle to get the university to recognize the union and the university interfered with our organizing in a number of ways, such as trying to stir up opposition but we were ultimately successful. We carried out the bargaining process at that time for the first Postdoc-specific contract in the country. The University of California has about 10 percent of the Postdocs in the country so it would have a big impact nationally. During the bargaining process the University tried to drag its feet, tried to put all these roadblocks to come to agreements, for example they would resche-

dule the bargaining dates or refuse to meet with us or have no proposals ready. I got involved and we had different campaigns to pressure them to bargain in good faith and reach an agreement. We did petitions to the President of the University, we prepared letters asking Congress to intervene, we did picketing, we did a strike vote, and we did direct actions at the meetings of the University Regents. I got involved in organizing my colleagues to participate in all of these. I was also elected into the bargaining team, so I was among the Postdocs who were meeting with the University, passing proposals. Eventually we persuaded some members of Congress to hold a hearing to investigate why it was taking so long and to call out the University for refusing bargain fairly. As a result of all this pressure, we eventually reached agreement just about 10 years ago, August 2010. That was a very groundbreaking agreement, the salary increases were very significant there were other rights and benefits, for example we won the right to have a very strong process to have a harassment and discrimination allegations included into the contract and that was a big improvement over the existing process, and we won longer employment lengths and more job security. In our next contract on 2016 we won paid parental leave for all Postdocs and other gains.



Photo 1. Dr. Sweeney during a meeting of the union.

I have been involved since as one of the union officers as either President or Vice President and I have also worked to organize more researchers. About 3-4 years ago, the staff scientists (also known as Academic Researchers) contacted our union about organizing so we went through the same process as with the Postdocs. After another long struggle with the University, this group reached agreement for a contract in November 2019 and that almost doubled the size of our union from 7,000 to 12,000.

Do you have any connections with other unions outside the US?

My union has been in touch with other unions outside the US that include Postdocs and other researchers. That is definitely something we are hoping to develop further in the future as many conditions for researchers are very similar around the world - there are very few permanent positions, there is widespread harassment and discrimination, and low pay. We also have in common the struggle to push governments to fund research at sufficient levels.

There seems to be a rising popularity of socialism in the US. What do you think are the chances of socialism in the US?

It's clear to me that major problems that we are facing cannot be solved under capitalism. The pandemic is the most recent example but there's also climate change, forest fires around the world, healthcare, racism, poverty, workers' rights, sexism, environmental destruction. It is clear to me and for more and more people that these can't be solved under capitalism. The US is the richest country in the world and some of these problems are the worst in this country, like the pandemic for example. I think more and more people are seeing what is possible when the resources of a country are focused on meeting people's needs and not on profit, and what socialist countries historically have achieved, and what countries that are building socialism right now – such as Cuba, Venezuela, China -- are able to achieve. In the union movement, as we fight the day-to-day struggle for dignity at work it becomes clear what is needed is fundamental systemic changes and that socialism is the way to really achieve that.

The presidential election is coming in the US; do you have any comments on that? Is there a candidate you

support?

I'm supporting Gloria la Riva, she is on ballot here in California with Peace and Freedom Party and the Party for Socialism and Liberation. I think people are looking for an alternative and two major candidates don't bring that: Trump is just a misogynist, every day promoting sexism and racism. While Biden basically came out and said "Nothing will fundamentally change" but that is not what people are looking for right now, so I think his chances to win are unclear. I think in this and the last election, many people were looking for something different, they were looking for candidates that are not the same neoliberal types. People are increasingly wanting universal healthcare, increasingly wanting better schools, relief for student debt and things like that. I believe people are looking for alternative candidates this year and the two major party candidates are not exciting a lot of people. Gloria's campaign is really exciting because it opens people up to a different picture of what society could be like. For example, Gloria has travelled to Cuba many times and has given talks about the Cuban medical and research system. Cuba has a very well-developed biotechnology sector and has developing many therapies and vaccines for diseases that major pharmaceutical companies won't touch because they affect primarily poor countries and are therefore not profitable enough. This from a small island country with relatively few resources, but it shows what is possible under socialism.

Any last messages to Turkish scientists?

From my union we send our solidarity. We know there is a lot of political repression right now and we send our support in their struggles for justice against oppression. Our struggles for better working conditions are all connected so we look forward to building links and solidarity.