

Statement of Support for Proposed Legal Worker Amendment from the Cascadia Chapter NLG

The Cascadia Chapter of the National Lawyers Guild (encompassing much of Oregon outside of Portland) whole-heartedly supports the adoption of the Legal Worker Amendment to the NLG Constitution.

In contrast to the primary focus on attorneys in conventional legal circles, legal workers have played a central and crucial role in activist defense, civil rights litigation, “know your rights” efforts, and other forms of movement-building the NLG is renowned for. The Cascadia Chapter believes that the values underlying the Guild reject categorizing or defining members of our community by the nature of their labor or possession of a law license, and represents a dangerous capitalistic approach to our shared work.

Our work with the movements we support, and the very purpose of the NLG, require an inclusive definition of legal work. This Amendment will help repair the sometimes quiet, sometimes blatant contradictions that have become clearer over time.

A few members have raised procedural arguments in opposition to this Amendment, which others have taken the effort to explain are ill-founded. Using procedural arguments to overshadow legitimate substantive arguments is a common tactic that mimics the privilege and misuse of power we see in the courtroom and in the legislatures.

Another misguided argument suggests this Amendment’s passage would increase risk of infiltration by forces unfriendly to the NLG. That is always a danger, and must be addressed through digital and other types of security culture; nothing about legal workers increases the risk. The Guild has always been a target of infiltration by the government and far-right. The NLG and other groups such as the Civil Liberties Defense Center and the Electronic Freedom Foundation can provide webinars and other resources for improving security culture.

In addition, while infiltration and surveillance are always something to be aware of, harm to the Guild has also come from within – for example, from members opposing more radical or revolutionary members, as the opposition of this Amendment indicates.

The majority of Guild chapters, including the Cascadia Chapter, currently use a broad and inclusive definition of legal worker, and are able to run their Legal Observer and Mass Defense programs while mitigating against the harm that infiltration poses. It would be appropriate and helpful for those chapters to share their experiences and strategies to provide guidance for more inclusive and non-exclusionary approach to their programs.

Let’s work together to make the NLG a less exclusionary space. In contrast to the inclusive chapters, a handful of chapters have developed an exclusive definition of “legal worker,” for example quelling the voices of non-attorney members in order to influence the outcome of local chapter board elections, resulting in the maintenance of the power structures that have kept attorneys above other legal workers for too long. That development is a major reason this Amendment has been drafted, and for our support of it.

As we all know, the Guild was founded as a response to the exclusionary practices of other the American Bar Association. Exclusionary measures that limit NLG chapter membership today ignores that historic foundation and our values. Legal workers, especially those supporting the Guild and movements as legal observers, are the visible frontline of our legal support efforts in the streets.

By voting Yes on this Amendment, Guild members will send a message of support to these workers, helping to ensure a better functioning and politically aligned NLG for the long term. The debate around adopting this Amendment asks us what sort of institution the Guild should be, and we think the answer is clearly that it must evolve into a more inclusive, liberatory Guild that questions power relationships both internally and in the world at large. We have work to do to get our own house in order, while we continue to fight against injustice more broadly.

Please vote YES on this Amendment.

In solidarity, Cascadia Chapter of the National Lawyers Guild

Lauren Regan, co-chair

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