

University of Maryland Graduate Labor Union - UAW Written Testimonies in Support of the Maryland General Assembly's Higher Education Collective Bargaining bill HB 211

Submitted by GLU-UAW on behalf of the authors below.

Here we have compiled testimony from GLU and GLU allies in support of collective bargaining for graduate workers in the University System of Maryland. The following is testimony from just a small number of the more than 2,500 graduate workers who have signed authorization cards to form a union with UAW.

I am a second year PhD student studying Biophysics at the University of Maryland, College Park. We are only promised one year of guaranteed funding for a degree that can take up to seven years. Furthermore, because biophysics is not a department, we lack undergraduate TA opportunities and students whose advisors cannot fund them must find new TA appointments every semester. This has led to situations where students must pay tuition (without income), or take breaks from their studies—which is especially disruptive to international students on F-1 visas. Having collective bargaining rights would enable graduate students to have a say in our own working conditions and would materially impact the lives of myself and my peers. With a recognized union, we could bargain for increased job security and reduce the stress and precarity of graduate work.

Anjali Verma

As a fourth year Biophysics PhD student, I have been asked to assist on a number of grant applications and reports with very tight deadlines in addition to my typical workload. Given that graduate assistants currently do not have clear legally-enforceable contracts, our advisors can request that graduate assistants perform any amount of auxiliary work that they desire. Without a clear contract, we will continue to have arbitrary tasks assigned to us with no overtime compensation if they require additional time to complete. A supermajority of graduate assistants are in agreement with this and other demands that can be addressed with collective bargaining. It is essential that we are explicitly granted collective bargaining rights considering that the University of Maryland refused to voluntarily recognize our union.

Anna Emenheiser

As a second year Entomology Masters student, I've been invited by the university to represent the Entomology department to the Dean of the College of Computer, Math, and Natural Sciences(CMNS), and to represent CMNS to the Provost of the university. In these toothless councils, every single request we have made has been rejected. A supermajority of graduate

workers shares my opinion that collective bargaining is the only way for graduate workers to effectively advocate for themselves.

Jenan El-Hifnawi

In my program, graduates apply into labs on campus, or at affiliated institutions, such as the NIH. Despite fulfilling the exact same academic requirements and doing the same lab work, only some of us have the right to negotiate our working conditions. The NIH recognizes that their graduate fellows are workers, who perform essential labor in collecting, writing up, and presenting research, and that without their labor, they would not be able to produce world-class clinical research. On the other hand, UMD refuses to recognize graduates as workers despite the fact that UMD's academic status as a premiere learning and research institution in the nation is not possible without the labor of grads who teach classes and perform research. The lack of collective bargaining rights for UMD grads means that there are rampant workplace issues on campus that have gone unaddressed for decades - unliveable wages, ineffective grievance procedures, and no parental leave policy, to name a few. As my program's Graduate Student Government (GSG) representative for the past three years, I can unequivocally say that the current shared governance system is not designed to solve labor issues for grad workers. We have tried time and time again to move administrators on these issues, and have been met time and time again with excuses, deflection, or been flat out ignored. A supermajority of grad workers, which include representatives from every single graduate program offered at the College Park campus, support collective bargaining and asked that UMD voluntarily recognize our union this fall. Even graduate shared governance bodies, which UMD currently claims is an effective way to address graduate labor issues, support collective bargaining. GSG has unanimously approved legislation this year advocating for voluntary recognition of our union, in addition to years of legislation in the past supporting collective bargaining rights at the legislative level. The Graduate Assistant Advisory Council has also released a statement supporting collective bargaining. Despite this, UMD still refused to voluntarily recognize our union. Collective bargaining rights for grad workers must be enshrined in state law so that the teachers and researchers who do essential work at our state universities are able to democratically and effectively negotiate for better working conditions.

Rose Ying

I am a 5th year PhD student at the University of Maryland in the Department of Atmospheric and Oceanic Science, working on solutions to sea level rise and climate change. It's work that I love and work that is critical for the future of our state. It's work that I'd like to be fairly treated while doing. And I am not alone. A supermajority of my colleagues at UMD College Park have signed union authorization cards with the United Auto Workers. We've held rallies and called on the USM Board of Regions to recognize our Union. Now, we're turning to the legislature, to give us the same rights Graduate Assistants across the country already enjoy, including at peer Big 10 institutions, like Rutgers. Here in our own state private Universities, like Johns Hopkins already

have a graduate union and continue to achieve excellence in research and teaching. I even fear that the lack of collective bargaining rights for graduate assistants at UMD could have a deleterious brain drain effect on our state. I've heard from highly qualified prospective graduates that the lack of a union at UMD is a serious concern when deciding where to attend graduate school. There's a simple solution: pass this bill. Grant us collective bargaining rights. And then watch the University of Maryland prosper.

Henry Hausmann

I am a second year physics PhD student in the physics department at UMD. We are guaranteed funding for only two years, when our degree could take up to a decade to earn. Even that funding guarantee becomes less than guaranteed past the first year of the program, especially for students working in research areas that are more theory-oriented. And the funding we get is not enough. Even though we are among the better paid departments on campus, I still know many students who are one minor emergency from financial ruin or have to live in suboptimal conditions to afford housing. And with the large number of international students in our department, I do not see a significant effort to assist them with visa-related issues and costs coming from visa problems. Most resources that are supposed to be available to graduate workers on campus are either grossly understaffed or have so many layers of bureaucracy that they are practically useless. Often these layers of bureaucracy create problems that are then next to impossible to resolve. I firmly believe that gaining our collective bargaining rights would allow us to remedy all these problems and more. And now a supermajority of the graduate workers at UMD agree with me. So it's time for the people who make the largest research university in the capital region thrive have the working conditions and compensation they deserve.

Greg Babić

I am a second-year PhD student in the Teaching and Learning, Policy and Leadership department at UMD. My entire professional career has been dedicated to education. After working as a public school teacher for 11 years in Washington, DC, I transitioned to my role as a doctoral student so I could understand how best to support preservice teachers to organize in coalition with the students and families they will serve. Being an instructor for two courses in the College of Education has reignited my passion for teaching, and the connections I have made with my students represent my lifelong commitment to service. Below are some of the responses I have received on anonymous end-of-term course surveys:

- “[T]his course has been one of my favorite classes I have taken at UMD. Cody is so personable and wants to see you succeed. I have never had a teacher care about the student's success in college so far. I have learned so much and will take everything I learned with me throughout life.”

- “The discussions we engaged in helped me understand not only more about the concepts but how to apply them. I love the discussion questions offered because I always think about what I’ve read from a new perspective. Additionally, we’re able to switch the conversation from just one set point. For example if we disagree we can explain why and even offer a different perspective. The room for joy was a breath of fresh air that many of my classes lacked. Furthermore, the assignments all directly related to what we were learning especially the content reflections. The feedback was very specific and the fast grading relieved my anxiety throughout the semester. I’d take this class all over again even if it wasn’t required. I strongly believe many of my skills as a future educator will come from this class, even if it’s not directly related to critical literacy.”
- “I appreciated how he took the time to understand that we are students with lives outside of school and his course. His awareness of that allowed him to create a comfortable and flexible environment where we felt happy to come to class rather than obligated to attend. He encouraged a level of discussion that the class collectively agreed on. For example, when we felt that small group discussions would be more beneficial for the day, he respected that and adjusted to what we asked. Overall, he fostered a very welcoming and supportive space for his students. Even I, someone who usually feels too anxious to share their thoughts aloud, felt much more comfortable participating in this class because of the environment he created.”

These are three anecdotes from dozens more I could have selected. I have deep respect and care for my students and my work at UMD. I have spent countless hours writing recommendations, offering professional and personal advice, and helping them manage mental health and family crises. However, my capacity to engage in this work diminishes daily because my stipend of \$27,486 does not cover my living expenses. I have had to access the campus pantry every week and limit my food consumption to save money I don’t have. I have skipped medical appointments and delayed procedures because I am constantly worried about costs. Graduate workers across the university perform essential work without which the university would cease functioning. As the Graduate Labor Union (GLU), we have been advocating for fair living and working conditions, proactively seeking out opportunities to partner with the university via the collective bargaining process. The university has refused to listen to our concerns, has refused to engage in good faith, and has refused to voluntarily recognize our union despite GLU having supermajority support from graduate assistants.

On its website, the UMD Division of Research defines justice in this way, “Reform existing systems, structures, and policies based in and perpetuating inequity while developing systems, structures, and policies that create equitable opportunity and resource distribution.” How can the university seriously commit to this mission when it continues to silence graduate students and dehumanize us through its continued disrespect for our well-being and livelihood? I request that the Maryland legislature support and pass the bill providing collective bargaining rights for graduate assistants. Not only would you be supporting me and my colleagues at the university, but you would also be supporting the thousands of future Maryland teachers with whom I hope to work for the rest of my career.

Cody Norton

I am a fourth year PhD candidate in the Biological Sciences program. I do work to help enumerate the ways in which Mycobacterium tuberculosis causes inflammation. Tuberculosis is an ancient disease that continues to cause a significant public health burden across the world. Recently, I had to move out of my apartment close to campus and into my parents' home over an hour away due to high rent prices and an extremely low graduate stipend. This has affected every single part of my work. I spend hours of additional time commuting to and from campus when this time could be used more productively for myself, and my research. I am not alone. My story is not unique amongst my cohort, and others in my department and across the university. In addition, as a graduate worker our responsibilities and rights are not recorded anywhere leading to a vast range in treatment that depends on the generosity of your PI. Collective bargaining rights could provide a more fair and equitable workplace and reduce some of the additional burdens we, as grad workers, often take on in order to make our contributions to academia possible.

Akshaya Ganesh

I am a fourth year Ph.D. student in the Biological Sciences program at UMD. As a graduate worker, I have chosen to commute 40 minutes to campus to avoid the expensive, cockroach and mice infected buildings in College Park. Last year, I made ~\$32,000 after taxes which all went towards living expenses, health insurance, car maintenance, and student fees. With this financial burden, I am living paycheck to paycheck, yet somehow, I am doing very well compared to many of my fellow graduate workers. I know graduate workers that picked up additional jobs to cover living expenses, if they can find the time. Some have taken off a year or more from their studies to work so they can pay for their education. Other graduate workers that are international students have been forced to suffer an abusive advisor to maintain their visa status. We have made these realities known to the university's administration, and each time we have been ignored. The university claims it values and depends on the work of its students, yet has turned a blind eye to the conditions that impact their work and livelihood. After a supermajority of graduate workers showed support for collective bargaining, we asked the university to voluntarily recognize our union and they refused. To improve the working conditions of graduate workers, I am requesting the passing of this bill to grant collective bargaining rights. With collective bargaining rights, the university can no longer ignore our efforts to improve the working conditions and lives of graduate workers.

Spencer Lewis

I am a second year PhD student in Computer Science. The computer science PhD program at UMD runs on a 9.5-month assistantship where we get paid ~\$30,000 (pre-taxes and deductions) as either a research assistant or, in my case, a teacher assistant. There are

semesters when I am unable to allocate time to my research and thesis work because I am already overloaded with TA responsibilities and classwork. Fortunately, my advisor has enough funding to pay for summer assistantships, meaning that I am able to get an additional \$16,000 during the summer as a research assistant where I develop computational tools that perform analyses on antimicrobial resistance and mobile genetic elements, two topics that are relevant to the study of disease evolution and to our public health.

Regrettably, that isn't the case for many of my peers. Because the cost of living is too high in the DC area, they are forced to take on a paid internship over the summer, meaning they either get further behind on research, or they work sleepless nights to stay on track. On top of that, many of those that have to take on an internship are on a student visa, meaning that they are not allowed to do work outside the university without their advisor's and UMD's approval. As a result, they have to register for an internship course which requires them to pay thousands of dollars in tuition to the university.

Over 55% of grad workers in the Computer Science department—and over 60% of grad workers throughout campus—have shown their support for unionization. And despite this, UMD admins have denied our demand for voluntary recognition. This is why we have chosen to come directly to the General Assembly to request for the legalization of collective bargaining in Maryland for grad workers.

Nathalie Bonin

When I started graduate school at Johns Hopkins over a decade ago (2012), my stipend was \$30,000 per year. At that time, nearly all of my stipend went towards living expenses. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (<https://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl>), a graduate student in 2024 would need to earn a stipend of about \$42,000 to have the same buying power, just to account for inflation. Imagine my horror to learn that my graduate colleagues today are earning *as much* or **less** than I did twelve years ago.

Graduate workers are the lifeblood of research and teaching universities. They perform much of the lab work which brings in millions of dollars in grant money to their institutions. They also play a significant role in teaching. While estimates vary by institution, and comprehensive statistics are lacking, graduate students may serve as instructors (including primary instructors) for as much as 20 to 40% of all undergraduate coursework. Graduate students are clearly essential workers for their universities, yet they have neither the recognition, protection, nor remuneration of regular employees. This must change. Please support the bill to grant collective bargaining rights to all graduate workers of this state.

Darya Task

I'm a first year Computer Science PhD student, and in my department it's clear that there is overwhelming support for the union. Almost everyone I talk to is supportive of the unionization

effort, and we have the cards signed to back this up with numbers. Despite this, UMD keeps claiming that unionization is not in our best interests. I don't think this is a decision UMD should be able to make for us, and I think it's essential for graduate workers to be able to self-determine our working conditions through our own organization. I know several people who are experiencing workplace equity issues and their only solution is to go through UMD-run channels that don't have their best interests at heart. Having a union that is actually on our side is extremely important to improving workplace conditions.

Sora Cullen-Baratloo

I am a 3rd year international PhD student in the Department of Geographical Sciences. I have a 12 month contract, but my contract is renewed on a yearly basis even though it takes on average at least 5 years to attain a PhD in this department. This lack of stability, in concert with a lack of clarity on the mechanisms for dropping PhD students from the program has caused a lot of anxiety for me. Additionally, while I do receive my stipend even over summer, the exorbitant cost of living in the DMV area means that between rent and groceries most of my stipend is used up. When I had a medical emergency last semester, I had to delay care due to financial concerns. I know worries about housing/healthcare/food security are common throughout the department.

Alongside this, being an international student has added another layer of instability. Just last year a student of my department was denied entry and was left unable to complete their PhD program, and there is very little infrastructure in place to protect and support international students in these situations. This is particularly of concern for my department, as the majority of research and teaching assistants of GEOG are not US citizens.

I believe that being able to bargain collectively will make it easier for our voices to be heard. While university administration may have the best of intentions, they cannot truly understand the daily struggles that impact graduate workers. The best way for graduate workers to gain the support and protections that we need is for us to have the bargaining power of a recognized union, which is in line with the will of a supermajority of graduate workers at UMD.

Rahayu Adzhar

As faculty members, we strongly support the right of graduate assistants to unionize. We are particularly dismayed that administrators claim that the faculty-student relationship would deteriorate if there was a graduate assistant union. To be clear, many faculty members would be delighted to see graduate assistants bargain collectively for higher stipends and better working conditions. Far from damaging our relationship with the graduate students, it would improve that relation because graduate students would be far less stressed and more able to concentrate on their graduate studies. They would not need to take on additional jobs to pay their bills and eat. As faculty members, we ask: If our university pays stipends so small that graduate students need to take on other outside jobs to eat and feed their families, is the university concerned

about assistants' special "student status." Or is their main concern the bottom line of the university and its need for cheap labor?

On behalf of faculty members of United Academics of Maryland at UMD (an affiliate of the American Association of University Professors and the American Federation of Teachers).

My name is Joseph Knisely, and I am a PhD candidate in Atmospheric and Oceanic Science. My research primarily focuses on numerical weather prediction and data processing. I perform research that improves our forecasting of severe weather to save lives and property, working directly with collaborators at NOAA to advance their mission statement as well as the mission statement of this university.

Throughout my time here, I have witnessed brilliant and talented graduate researchers abandoned by both advisors and departments, forced to scramble for secondary work or funding sources while receiving minimal support from their employer, the university. I have seen workers abused and overworked by their superiors, trapped in untenable situations where they must choose between mistreatment or losing their jobs, health insurance, and future career prospects.

I have witnessed fellow workers experience sexual misconduct and assault from colleagues and superiors, and I have seen firsthand the university's callous disregard for their experiences. Through personal experience with the Title IX office, I can state with conviction that this university prioritizes protecting itself from liability over uncovering the truth and providing fair treatment to victims.

I have watched as international workers, who have traveled thousands of miles to join our community, advance our science, and contribute to our academic mission, are treated as disposable and disregarded at the slightest inconvenience to this university.

As invaluable and irreplaceable workers within the university system, graduate workers deserve a voice in our salary and benefits negotiations. We should not face abandonment or abuse from their advisors, departments, and superiors. Victims of sexual assault and misconduct deserve fair treatment and need an advocate in their corner. International workers should be treated as equal members of our university community, not as disposable assets.

A supermajority of graduate workers across this campus have signed union authorization cards explicitly expressing support for the formation of a labor union, and that number continues to grow every day. If this university and state legislature continue to ignore our demands, it is not a question of "if" but "when" we will withhold our labor and bring this university system to a halt. For the sake of the students, workers, professors, and researchers who constitute this university community, make the right decision and grant us collective bargaining rights now.

Joseph Knisely

Graduate workers are arguably the backbone of any university. In my experience as a second year graduate student studying Geology, I see evidence for this first hand. Whether it's inspiring eager undergraduate students in an introductory geology lab in a way that a professor never could or performing cutting edge research tasks that professionals directly said would never work, myself and my fellow graduate workers play a major role in both the student experience and the research prowess of the University of Maryland. Yet, a majority of graduate students at the University of Maryland and surrounding universities are unsatisfied with their compensation. Whether it's food insecurity or trouble paying rent every month, graduate workers in Maryland are experiencing a financial stress on top of the stress of obtaining a higher degree that is simply not sustainable. I, personally, could pay my rent every month, living from paycheck to paycheck, but a simple car repair bill saw my wife and I taking on debt and considering a move away from my education. Ultimately, if we want Maryland's public universities to maintain or improve their status as renowned centers of education, their graduate workers must be paid a sustainable wage, and the only way to achieve this goal in a democratic way is to allow them to unionize. With a supermajority already achieved among the graduate student population, all we need to make this goal a reality and set Maryland's higher education system on an upward track in the future is collective bargaining rights. This is why we come to the General Assembly, not because we are simply looking out for our own financial interests, but for the interests of Maryland's Universities and the general public who benefit from a world-class higher education system in the United States.

Zach Vig

I am a third year PhD student in History. One of the University of Maryland's favorite things to say is that "graduate students are students first." Yet, in the absence of a binding work contract, many of us are forced to work long hours far beyond the 20 hours per week stipulated in unenforceable "Statements of Mutual Expectations." The low pay we receive force many of us to work jobs outside our Graduate Assistantships to make rent in this high cost of living area. Our struggle to make ends meet diverts time away from our studies—the readings we must complete for our coursework and comprehensive exams, the research we perform for our dissertations, and the professional development activities (like conference presentations and publishing) in which we must participate to advance in our field. Collective bargaining rights will allow graduate workers to have a real say in our pay and working conditions as workers, which in turn will improve our learning conditions as students.

Andrea Gutmann Fuentes

I am an assistant professor in Government and Politics in my third year at the University of Maryland College Park. In that time I have advised about a dozen graduate workers formally

and several more informally. In addition, beginning in September of every academic year, I receive about 6-7 emails from prospective students that are interested in pursuing their PhD in Government and Politics. It breaks my heart to admit that each year I struggle to recruit prospective students to UMD, especially when they are considering our peer institutions across the Big10 like Rutgers, Michigan, and Northwestern.

It's not that I believe the graduate training that they will receive in political science is better at these other universities. Our department hosts leading scholars across a range of substantive areas and methodologies. But, unlike several of our peer institutions, our graduate workers at UMD lack the fundamental democratic right to unionize.

For over a decade, peer-reviewed scholarship has demonstrated that unionization for graduate workers has substantial material benefits. Graduate wages and stipends are significantly higher and provide an actual living wage where workers have CB rights. Graduate workers report greater respect for principles of academic freedom where workers have CB rights. Job placements after the phd are positively correlated with higher graduate stipends, and yes unionization is also positively correlated with tenure-track placements after the phd.

I want to be excited about welcoming new graduate workers to the University of Maryland. But I maintain significant reservations when I know our grads could go elsewhere and earn a living wage. You can change that reality by recognizing grad workers right to CB. 2,000+ graduate workers are not wrong.

Marcus Johnson

I am a first year Masters Student in the School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation. In my work as a graduate assistant, I have calculated the precise housing shortages faced in the State of Maryland, and found that these shortages are worst for low income residents of Montgomery and Prince George's county, which is the precise demographic of graduate workers of the university. With this ongoing cost of living and housing crisis, it is imperative that the university better support its students and without a union, this has been shown to be wishful thinking. A collective bargaining agreement would dramatically reduce the burden faced by graduate workers and allow us to fully engage with our work, rather than search for second jobs to make rent and pay for groceries. The power of the legislature to force recognition of our union, supported by over 2,000 of us students, is necessary for the continued quality of our research and a dignified living for our workers.

Cole Shultz