



MARYLAND STATE & D.C. AFL-CIO

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SB 521 – State Personnel – Collective Bargaining Senate Finance Committee February 18, 2021

SUPPORT

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Madam Chair and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of SB 521 – State Personnel – Collective Bargaining. My name is Donna S. Edwards, and I am the President of the Maryland State and District of Columbia AFL-CIO. On behalf of the 340,000 union members, I offer the following comments.

Currently, the University of Maryland system considers Graduate Assistants (GA) as students, not workers. This means that GAs do not have the right to collectively bargain for better wages and benefits. The “meet and confer” process – a University compromise meant to mollify students who fought for collective bargaining in 2012 – has failed to address key concerns of Graduate Assistants, mainly on issues of stipends, intellectual property rights, and family leave. The only way for workers to fully realize their rights in the workplace is by bargaining with their employers. Graduate Assistants at the University System of Maryland, St. Mary’s College of Maryland, and Morgan State University need and have earned the right to collectively bargain.

Collective bargaining for graduate assistants is not new, unique, or different. Currently, 30 universities, including the University of Wisconsin, University of Michigan, University of Illinois, and the University of California at Berkley have collective bargaining for graduate assistants. These are universities that – in the case of Wisconsin – have had collective bargaining rights for student workers for decades. Far from seeing any ill effects that are constantly promulgated by those who oppose collective bargaining, these universities are thriving, and the student workers on their campuses have the additional protections afforded them through speaking with one voice at the bargaining table.

In a recent Executive Order, President Biden reaffirmed the position of the United States on collective bargaining rights by stating “*It is also the policy of the United States to encourage*

union organizing and collective bargaining.”¹ We believe that the State of Maryland should follow the lead of the United States and do the same. SB 521 is an affirmation of our values to encourage and empower workers to decide their own fate, and not be tied solely to the decisions of the employers.

It is time to give Graduate Assistants the right to collectively bargain for themselves, and **for these reasons, we urge a favorable vote on SB 521.**

¹ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/22/executive-order-protecting-the-federal-workforce/>