

**Written Testimony Submitted to the
Maryland House Appropriations Committee
By Haroon Popal, Postdoctoral Associate
HB 493**

**State Personnel - Collective Bargaining - Faculty, Part-Time Faculty, and Graduate Assistants
February 9, 2024**

FAVORABLE

Dear Chair Barnes, Vice Chair Chang, and members of the House Appropriations Committee,

My name is Haroon Popal and I am a postdoctoral associate (postdoc) in the Psychology Department, at the University of Maryland (UMD), College Park. I have been working at UMD for seven months, conducting research of how people understand and neuronally represent social relationships, with a particular interest in adolescents with and without autism spectrum disorders. Despite my short time at UMD, it is already clear to me that this institution is not an inclusive environment for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, and the institution has no mechanism for my concerns to be heard and addressed. I am writing in support of the collective bargaining bill for higher education workers in Maryland, because a union would provide this mechanism to address the financial setbacks of postdocs, where the University has failed.

In my second year of graduate school, my father was diagnosed with Lewy Body Dementia, a disorder in the Parkinson family of dementias but with more significant cognitive symptoms. In hindsight, I should have dropped out and found a career that more accurately rewards my strong computational background than academia does. But I believed I could fulfill my family obligations as a postdoc. When I received my verbal offer from my current mentor at UMD, I made my situation clear to her, as well as my need to be able to afford the significant cost of living in the DC area, and be able to afford starting my own family, as I am not in my 30s. My mentor agreed; she offered me \$70,000, which is significantly above the standard pay of a postdoc in the psychology and neuroscience field (\$56,484). I was excited to be able to continue my desired career path, doing the research that I love, while also being able to take care of my family and be close to their home in Northern Virginia. However, UMD did not approve of this offer, with their justification being that all postdocs in the psychology department must be paid the same. This policy, which I assume is motivated by a desire for equality, fails in terms of equity. A salary of \$56,484 is not enough to save up for a house, start a family, and take care of one's elderly parents in the expensive DC metro area. Perhaps it is for someone who does not have elderly sick parents, or has a wealthy family that can help them with a down payment for a house. Being the son of Afghan refugees, I do not have that privileged background. I am now left with a choice: my career that I have been working towards for over nine years, or my family.

I have tried to make my concerns heard but have been met with walls. My advisor has been able to discuss the low postdoc pay with the Dean in the hopes of increasing our salary caps, but there has been no official communication to us postdocs about their plans. Psychology researchers are aware that postdocs across the country are struggling, as has been published in highly prestigious journals such as Nature. The NIH has also released a report detailing the need for higher salaries and better benefits for postdocs, in order to keep them in academia, as so many of us are forced to find jobs in industry that better rewards our skill sets. UMD must be fully aware of these issues, especially during the pandemic. Their failure to communicate with us on their thoughts and the justification for their restrictive policies

indicates that they do not respect our work, do not understand our work, and they do not have our best interest in mind. This is completely undemocratic, and demeaning to us researchers, who have trained for years in our fields, have earned PhDs, and are doing cutting edge research while earning millions of dollars in grants for the University. A union would provide us with the power to directly engage with the decision makers at the University, rather than the wall of bureaucracy that I have faced in trying to better my situation. I would like to again, encourage members of the committee to pass our bill, so that we can quickly form our union, bargain a fair contract, and return to focusing our efforts on our important research.

Sincerely,
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*This testimony has been submitted on behalf of this individual by the University of Maryland Graduate Labor Union (GLU) and the Chapter of the American Association of University Professors (UMD AAUP).
Please contact us at mail@umdgradworkers.org or umdaaup@gmail.com if you have any questions.*