

**Written Testimony Submitted to the  
Maryland Senate Finance Committee  
By Janel Niska, Graduate Research Assistant  
SB0823**

**State Personnel - Collective Bargaining - Faculty, Part-Time Faculty, and Graduate Assistants  
March 7, 2024  
FAVORABLE**

Dear Chair Beidle, Vice Chair Klausmeier, and members of the Senate Finance Committee,

My name is Janel Niska, and I am a Ph.D. Mechanical Engineering Graduate Research Assistant at the University of Maryland College Park, where I have worked for nearly 5 years. I call on this committee to issue a favorable report to this Bill. The state already grants the right of collective bargaining towards nearly every other state employee, as well as the faculty at our community colleges and the non-academic workforce at our four-year institutions. It is clear that this right should be extended to all higher ed workers in Maryland.

Currently, I work remotely from Arizona as my time in Maryland was, to put it lightly, horrific. I moved from Illinois in 2019 to take up a position in a lab on campus. I signed a contract stating I would work 20 hours a week in the lab and spend 20 hours a week on schoolwork. I was never mentored or told much about the project I was working on and, by the end of 2019, I received an "unsatisfactory" review as I had not met deadlines that were never communicated to me. In March 2020, the pandemic hit. My advisor forced me and my lab mates to work in the lab for two weeks after shutdown against university policy. Someone finally advocated for our health, and we were allowed to go home until the university opened up again in June 2020. Once we opened back up, I was promised an undergraduate student to help me with my project specifically. We hired a student, but that student was used on other projects, such as my advisor's personal company (which I find unethical using university funds and staff for his company's benefit). By the fall, I was encouraged to skip class and work overtime in the lab. I came to the university to study but was told that my classes were to take a backseat to the work I was doing for the lab. I was working 30-60 hours a week in the lab (greater than my agreed upon 20 hours) and my lab mates came up to let me know they felt like I was being treated differently than the rest of them. I tried to work through it by throwing more hours at the lab. By May 2021, I reported the university for a pattern of discrimination against me. I had to hire a lawyer, faced retaliation, and was still removed from the lab. The OCRSM (Office of Civil Rights and Sexual Misconduct) was involved but they provided no reasonable solution. The case was closed with no resolution. From October 2020 to August 2021, I had: lost my grandma to COVID, found my boyfriend of 8 years had cheated on me and had to go through a breakup, had an attack on my home, lost someone I knew to suicide, had to drive 700+ miles away the day after my qualifying exam to pick up whatever things I could fit in my car from my ex, and then lost my job due to discrimination. Luckily, a professor had a project available, and it was something that could be done remotely. I was able to move closer to my family in May 2022 and hope to finish by the end of this year (2024).

Having a union would've meant the world to me during my ordeal. The first thing that would have helped me would have been a union representative to speak on my behalf. I struggled frequently to find the words to state what was done to me. I had a long list of actions that showed a pattern of discrimination. While I had the privilege to pay for a lawyer, many students do not have that privilege. I was able to borrow money from my family and, in the end, I had spent over \$3000, with another \$3000 left in my retention. Having a representative could have saved me money, time, and effort that, by this point, I barely had the energy for.

A union could have also helped with the process of finding a new advisor. Currently, there are no processes or structures in place for finding a new advisor. Graduate students' funding and stipend are typically directly linked to the advisor and project, thus finding a new advisor is difficult and inadvisable. I tried to stay with the lab as long as possible but did not have the support to stay there. My new advisor I found by pure luck. Finally, having a union to speak on my behalf before I reached the point of needing a lawyer would have helped significantly. My advisor did not fill out the "Expectations" document that is required of all students. The department says that it is required but does not enforce this. My lab pushed me beyond what is reasonable to finish a project with no help, no mentoring, and I was regularly mocked for not having skills my lab mates were taught. I was asked to ignore my studies and work twice as much as the agreed upon contract. A union could've stepped in for me, as I felt unable to speak up on my own without risk to my stipend, degree, and future. I have wanted a PhD for a long time, and being a woman should not be a barrier to achieve my dream.

Members of the Committee, this state has for decades viewed collective bargaining between state employees and management as the best way to promote democracy in our workplaces and public institutions. The right to collective bargaining has long been recognized as not only a fundamental human right, but also as the best method of ensuring that employee voices play a vital role in constructing conditions that govern our workplaces. It is a right granted to many other public higher ed institutions in the nation, and indeed to many private, prestigious institutions in our own state. The reasons to exempt four-year public higher ed institutions from this path make no sense. I again therefore call for a favorable report to this Bill. Thank you for your time in reading my story.

Sincerely,

Janel Niska, Graduate Research Assistant  
Department of Mechanical Engineering  
University of Maryland, College Park  
7901 Regents Drive, College Park, MD 20740  
jeniska@umd.edu

*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 [info@umdgradworkers.org](mailto:info@umdgradworkers.org) or [umdaaup@gmail.com](mailto:umdaaup@gmail.com) if you have any questions.*