

TESTIMONY OF LENORA RENEE KNOWLES
BEFORE THE
FINANCE COMMITTEE OF THE MARYLAND SENATE
For a hearing on
SENATE BILL 823: "STATE PERSONNEL –COLLECTIVE BARGAINING –
Faculty-Part-Time Faculty and Graduate Assistants"

MARCH 06, 2024

Chairperson Beidle, Vice Chairperson Klausmeier and distinguished members of the Senate Finance Committee:

My name is Lenora Renee Knowles. I'm a member of the Graduate Labor Union and a Ph.D. candidate in the Harriet Tubman Department of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Maryland-College Park. I'm also a Black and Honduran first-generation college graduate. I've lived in District 40 for six years and I'm involved in community-led development work in District 45. If graduate workers had the opportunity to bargain collectively, it would clarify work expectations in ways that shorten time to degree and lead to more equitable work and learning conditions.

During my first year as a graduate worker I learned a hard lesson, the backbone of the University of Maryland, College Park is low-wage graduate labor. That first year, I had a supervisor who tried to elude paying their portion of my summer stipend which was outlined in a vague portion of the funding letter issued by my department. During this same year I was assigned two other supervisors who expected me to work past the term stipulated in my work agreement. Graduate workers do not get standard, enforceable contracts. Instead, stipend levels and work conditions vary from student to student and across departments. As someone who grew up Black and Latina in a working-class single parent household, I know how difficult it is to reach the level of doctoral studies, because of this country's deeply inequitable education system. The stress and isolation of being a low-wage graduate worker, on top of completing a demanding doctoral program makes it that much more challenging to complete the degree in a timely manner, which is an important metric when assessing the quality of a graduate program. Nevertheless, I've persisted because I want to make a meaningful contribution to my communities and the State of Maryland.

Graduate workers at University of Maryland-College Park, Morgan State University, Towson University, University of Maryland-Baltimore and elsewhere in the system need the same right that Johns Hopkins University grads now have. If I and my fellow graduate assistants had a standard contract and representation facilitated by a graduate labor union (and enabled by collective bargaining rights), supervisors would be informed about workplace norms and our experience as workers would be more equitable.

I ask for a favorable report on SB 823.