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Environment and Transportation
Committee

Chair, Non-Energy Utilities
Subcommittee

THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Testimony: HB141 - State Personnel - Collective Bargaining - Graduate Assistants

Committee: Government, Labor, and Elections

Hearing Date: February 10, 2026

Position: Favorable

Good afternoon, Chair Wells, Vice Chair Kerr, and members of the Government, Labor, and Elections Committee. For the record, I'm Delegate Linda Foley and I'm presenting HB141 State Personnel - Collective Bargaining - Graduate Assistants.

HB141 extends collective bargaining rights to graduate assistants and post-doctoral associates who work at the University System of Maryland, and at Morgan State and St. Mary's College of Maryland. With the exception of faculty—on which I have another bill—these academic workers are the only significant group of state employees who are prohibited from having a union contract.

Before I enumerate the reasons UMD grad assistants need and deserve collective bargaining, let me stress that this bill does not require UMD to raise salaries or increase benefits. The budget for the UMD system will be whatever budget we and the governor require UMD to have. In other words, this bill and collective bargaining rights for grad assistants does not increase the size of the pie, so to speak. What it does is provide workers, if they choose to unionize, a voice in how the pie is divided.

Now, with respect to collective bargaining rights for graduate assistants and post-doctoral associates, as of January 2026, 22 states and Washington DC have similar laws to what we are trying to do with this bill.

This list includes 11 Big Ten schools—Rutgers, Michigan State, University of Michigan, UCLA, Northwestern, Illinois, Minnesota, Oregon, Washington, University of Southern California, and Iowa. Within our own state, John Hopkins enables their graduate workers to unionize.

In the past few years, four new schools joined the Big Ten conference—the University of Oregon, University of Washington, University of Southern California, and UCLA. All of them have bargaining agreements for graduate assistants. Yet, our university system in Maryland refuses to provide such an opportunity for our graduate assistants.

Around the country, more than 100,000 graduate assistants have joined the United Auto Workers Union ALONE. (The UAW is the union that has been organizing at UMD.) There are at least 5 other national unions with graduate assistant members.

Witnesses for university system administrators no doubt will tell you how impossible it will be to recognize collective bargaining for its grad assistants. How it will destroy relationships that make our universities work, how it will affect academic excellence, that there are already procedures in place to address the concerns of grad assistants or that collective bargaining will drive up the costs of higher education at our schools. They may also tell you that they recently updated their meet and confer process, yet we know this process is not the same as having a right to unionize.

That is fake news. If collective bargaining can work at Michigan, Harvard and Johns Hopkins - to name just a few, it can and should work within the University System of Maryland.

If experience is any teacher, collective bargaining likely will improve the overall atmosphere and quality of education at our universities.

UMD promotes itself as an institution that is "Fearless" in its approach to education. So why is the UMD Administration so FEARFUL of giving its graduate employees a real voice at work? Why are they so FEARFUL of having collective bargaining for the front-line grad assistants who are the heart and soul of the University system?

At the very least, a university with a "fearless" reputation would not be afraid of letting its graduate employees have a say in their workplace conditions. A "fearless" university would, at the very least, remain neutral and not oppose the rights of its workers to unionize.

I urge a FAVORABLE report on HB141.