

Melinda Day

Statement for the House Government Operations Committee Hearing on SB 0971

February 29, 2012

We are here today to discuss a bill that will once and for all make it clear that Graduate Student Research Assistants are just that, graduate students. Until recently, this matter had been settled. In 1981, the Michigan Employment Relations Commission, after an exhaustive hearing, ruled that GSRAs are students and not employees and more particularly not public employees under the Public Employment Relations Act. Today, graduate students at the University of Michigan are being held hostage due to an act of collusion between the majority party members of the board of regents and the Graduate Employees Organization, a member of AFT.

This all started over a year ago during the most recent contract negotiations between the GEO and the University of Michigan. In October of 2010, the GEO released a preliminary bargaining platform that included an illegal top-down-organizing scheme. The union was looking to have the university declare GSRAs to be a part of their bargaining unit in their new contract. The union abandoned that strategy and began pushing for an equally illegal card check effort during their negotiations, and were told no. Only then, when no other option was left to them, did the union begin a push for a union authorization election. From the very beginning, the union had made it clear that the opinion of GSRAs was their last consideration. Their actions clearly indicated that their priority was not the GSRAs, but rather the million dollars per year in additional dues that we represented.

With all of that money on the line, the GEO was not about to allow a pesky legal decision to stop them. It was at this time that the board of regents passed, against the advice of the University President, the provost, and the deans, a resolution declaring GSRAs to be employees with an extremely rare 6 to 2 party line vote. They overstepped their bounds in that vote, for under Article 4 section 48 of the Constitution of 1963 only this legislative body has the jurisdiction to change our classification from that of a student to a public employee. But the resolution was enough to provide political cover for MERC to overturn their previous ruling and move ahead with authorizing an election. It was only through the actions of a group of graduate student research assistants, who dared to stand up against the vast political machine of the AFT, that we are not yet newly unionized employees. Finding ourselves abandoned by the university, the one organization we thought would fight for us and our right to an education without interference from a third party, we have done everything in our power to voice the truth; we are students. However, at every turn we have been ignored and denied our due process rights.

Currently, there is an ongoing MERC hearing to determine if things have changed since 1981 and if GSRAs should now be considered employees. Considering that the group, Students Against GSRA Unionization, representing close to 400 GSRAs, has been denied participation in the hearing, it is clear that the current MERC board has already decided that we are employees. The hearing is being used to provide cover for their predetermined decision.

Through all of the political maneuvering, the one thing that is being ignored is that ultimately, the basic facts of what GSRA's do has not changed in the past thirty years. The work that GSRA's do on a daily basis cannot be distinguished from our dissertation work. That is the truth and the reason for the 1981 decision. After World War II, the federal government decided that it was important to invest in the training of future scientists. In order to accomplish that goal, federal granting agencies began providing stipends and other benefits, so that graduate students could concentrate all of their effort on their education. We receive those benefits not as compensation for work done, but as financial aid so that we can concentrate solely on learning to become independent thinkers and tomorrow's scientists. That is the motivation behind GSRA stipends. We do not lose those benefits if we need to change labs, or fail to pass our qualify exams on the first attempt. Instead, our departments work with us to find a better learning environment. Once in a lab, we put in work, but it is school work. We perform research so that we can write our dissertations and learn by doing. Everything we are asked to do is in furtherance of our education and the goal of becoming independent researchers. It is for all of those reasons that we are students and not employees.

Think what would happen if students were allowed to be classified as public employees. Is MERC capable of handling whether a graduate student is making sufficient progress on his or her research on the effects of corrosion in nuclear reactors? The study of black holes? Material sciences? The composition of cells? Graduate students' research is completely tied to their academics. What could a union, or for that matter MERC, possibly accomplish in regard to what is so clearly an academic matter?

This legislation is needed to protect all current and future graduate students' education. A vote for this bill is a vote to reaffirm that the best learning environment is one that promotes a mentor-mentee relationship, not one that promotes the potential adversarial relationship of an employer-employee. Amending the Public Employment Relations Act to state that GSRA's are students would reaffirm the State of Michigan's commitment to high quality education, and would prevent any future politically motivated meddling. I urge you, on the behalf of myself, hundreds of graduate students, and the faculty to vote yes on Senate Bill 0971. Thank you.