

April 4, 2024

Minnesota Senate
Minnesota Senate Building
95 University Avenue W.
State and Local Government and Veterans Committee
Saint Paul, MN 55155

Chair Dziedzic and Members of the State and Local Government and Veterans Committee:

I speak as a graduate fellow in favor of SF 4597. I am a third year PhD Candidate in the department of Biomedical Engineering at the University of Minnesota. At the University of Minnesota, Graduate Assistants are represented by UMN GLU, Local 1105 of the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers.

When I was admitted to the PhD program I was given a 3 year College of Science and Engineering fellowship offered to incoming students from underrepresented backgrounds who have outstanding qualifications. During the academic year I am paid through this fellowship funding. Over the summer I was paid through my lab as a research assistant.

I am passionate about the important work that I do as a graduate fellow. Under the current PELRA statute, my work during the summer as a research assistant is considered a bargaining unit position represented by my union, GLU-UE Local 1105. However, my fellowship position over the academic year is not even considered by the university nor the law to be employment at all.

During summer months while I am funded as a research assistant, I work on the development of polymeric biomaterials that can deliver medicines to biological systems. My duties include polymer synthesis and characterization, equipment upkeep, waste disposal, management of harsh organic solvents, training new lab members, and supply ordering and restocking. It is exciting and innovative work.

During the academic year when I am funded through fellowship, I go into work every day in the same lab, with the same supervisor, conducting the exact same work duties. The only difference is that the university and PELRA do not consider this to be employment in any way. I am outside of the bargaining unit and do not have access to hard fought protections gained by our union. I lack recognized access to our grievance procedure. I can be made to take unpaid work related training. There is little recourse if I am told to work far above 40 hours per week.

Thousands of other graduate workers are in the same position that I am. We conduct research, teaching, service, and administrative responsibilities much the same as other graduate assistants, but because of a technicality in PELRA, we lack collective bargaining rights.

SF 4597 would rectify this by explicitly recognizing fellows for what we are: graduate student workers employed by the university to further its research, teaching, and service mission. I ask you to join graduate assistants, undergraduate workers, staff, faculty, and unions across the state in supporting the passage of this bill.

Thank you for your consideration,

Sandra Shahriar
Graduate Fellow/PhD Candidate, University of Minnesota