

To Whom It Concerns:

My name is Michael Ziegler, and I am writing to you as the President of Local 6516, a labor union representing more than 2,000 graduate student workers, postdoctoral scholars, and workers in several categories of undergraduate employment at Brown University. I am writing to urge you to support the amendments to the state's Labor Relations Act proposed in House Bill 5187. My hope is to provide you with information about the essential role unionization has played in benefiting the families of our members. I will also discuss the impending threat to our right to organize under the National Labor Relations Act. Together these considerations will show the vital need to protect the rights of student workers to organize and collectively bargain.

I began as a graduate student worker at Brown in September of 2019. At the time, Brown University was in the process of bargaining its first contract with graduate workers. My salary for that academic year was just under \$31,500. Since that time, our union has successfully negotiated two collective bargaining agreements with the University. In my own case, this has meant that next year, my last as a PhD candidate at Brown, I will receive total base compensation of just under \$53,500.

This 70% salary increase has made a tremendous difference to my family. My wife and I are expecting our first child next month. Although the cost of living in Providence has risen considerably since I moved here more than five years ago, the raises we've won through collective bargaining have meant that we've been able to continue to afford basic necessities like food and housing while planning to start a family. Ours is just one of hundreds of examples of how graduate worker unionization has provided tremendous benefits to employees of one of our state's most important institutions. Brown has thrived financially these past five years, with the market value of its endowment having grown [\\$3 billion since 2019](#). The continuing unionization of workers at Brown has ensured the benefits of that growth have been shared with those of us performing work essential to the functioning of the University.

Unfortunately, our protections for organizing and collective bargaining under the National Labor Relations Act are now under threat. The basis for our recognition as workers under the NLRA only came in 2016 with the National Labor Relations Board's "[Columbia decision](#)." In 2019 a new Board sought to overturn the decision. While it was ultimately unsuccessful in this attempt, there is now a renewed prospect of an NLRB hostile to the rights of student workers to organize. It is for this reason that we feel it is essential to enact protections for our organizing in Rhode Island's state labor code in case these rights are stripped at the federal level.

It is well within the general interest of our state that student workers, at Brown or elsewhere, continue to enjoy rights of organization and collective bargaining. The Labor Relations Act recognizes that "the denial by some employers of the right of employees to freely organize and... collective bargaining" can lead to depressed purchasing power on the part of workers, resulting in severe economic consequences for the state as a whole. A refusal by Brown to bargain fair wages would mean one of Rhode Island's largest employers could impose wages that do not account for the rise in the cost of living, something that has recently been the case in their

dealings with non-unionized employees. The scale of Brown's employment means it is not only Brown employees who would bear the brunt of a loss in their bargaining power.

Moreover, the Act currently recognizes that legal protection of the rights of organization "removes certain sources of industrial strife and unrest." The framework for collective bargaining between grad workers and the University has generally resulted in peaceful industrial relations on campus. In the absence of such a framework, I fear that we may enter a period of heightened disputes between Brown and its graduate student employees. Our labor is essential to the research and teaching functions of the University, and we would want to avoid conditions that might contribute to a prolonged work stoppage.

In summary, unionization of grad workers has already contributed to boosting the living standards of many Rhode Islanders. With the labor rights of these workers under threat, it is critical for the legislature to act now to maintain smooth industrial relations in one of our economy's most important sectors. Our members are involved in finding cures for deadly illnesses and educating our state's next generation of leaders. We value our important work and have every intention of holding our employer to account in fairly compensating it.

Lastly, I would like to thank Deputy Leader Corvese and his cosponsors for their work on drafting these amendments. If you would like to learn more about how graduate student workers shape Rhode Island's economy, please do not hesitate to contact me at president@glounion.org.

Sincerely yours,
Michael Ziegler