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State Certifies NJIT Graduate and Postdoc Workers Union

Union vote verified while AFT national reaches 1.5 million-member milestone

NEWARK...A unique group of high-tech academics workers at the New Jersey Institute of Technology has voted to unionize, the state's Public Employee Relations Commission (PERC) announced today. Graduate and postdoctoral workers at the state's leading technology university have formed a union to advocate for better working conditions and healthcare benefits—the second graduate worker union in the state and the first whose composition includes postdoctoral workers.

“Without a contract we do not know what is going to happen in terms of support for the following semester,” said Ali Avni Cirik, a teaching assistant in the Information Systems department and one of the graduate workers organizers. This contrasts with what Ali saw in Holland when he visited peers there and saw that graduate workers had multi-year appointments, making for stability to focus on research and teaching.

Cirik is among more than 400 members of the new union who work throughout the NJIT departments on a range of topics from planning green cities to strengthening first responses to national emergencies.

Yet graduate workers lack the comprehensive insurance their unionized peers at places like nearby Rutgers University enjoy. Last year, Shilan Motamedvaziri of the Chemical Engineering department needed surgery and found out that many expenses would not be covered by the NJIT catastrophic plan—the only plan available to graduate workers. Instead of proceeding here, Shilan opted to return to her native Iran to have her surgery. In addition to adequate health insurance, Shilan sees the treatment of graduate TAs and RAs as dictating the level of professionals the university can attract. “I came from a good (undergrad) school in Iran. I believe if we have better treatment of graduate workers, we will have a better school.”

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The group selected United Council of Academics at NJIT (UCAN) for its name and affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). In the past two years, AFT has won 85 organizing victories and chartered 53 locals nationally. “More and more people who work in schools, colleges and universities, health facilities, and government buildings want a union to provide its members with a voice, support and resources,” said AFT president Randi Weingarten at their convention in Seattle, WA last week.

AFT New Jersey State Federation president William Lipkin said, “On behalf more than 30,000 education workers across the state, we are proud to welcome NJIT’s new union of graduate and postdoctoral employees. This group decided to unionize to improve their professional standing within NJIT and work in an environment where there is respect for the vital research they perform and classes they teach.”

The United Council of Academics at NJIT is the new union representing graduate and post doctoral workers. AFT New Jersey State Federation is the state’s largest higher education union, representing full-time and part-time faculty and staff at state colleges and universities and six community colleges. A pre-kindergarten through 12-division represents teachers and support personnel in schools throughout the state. Together with its healthcare affiliate HPAE, AFT represents more than 40,000 workers in New Jersey.

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