

Trade unions hold town hall at George Mason University: University workers need independent organization, not appeals to Democrats

International Youth and Students for Social Equality at George Mason University
25 February 2026

On Saturday, February 28, various trade union activists affiliated with the American Association of University Professors, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and UNITE HERE are holding a “Virginia Labor Coalition Town Hall” outside George Mason University (GMU). The event, which calls on “university workers, students, community and political allies” to fight for bargaining rights, is a shameless effort to court the Democratic Party and promote it as an ally of working people.

The aim of the event is to rally support to lobby state officials so that higher education workers will be included in Virginia House Bill 1263, the state’s collective bargaining legislation. Virginia, a “right to work” state, has had laws since 1947 that restrict union activities in various ways.

HB 1263 and its state Senate equivalent, SB 378, while expanding collective bargaining rights for many sectors of public workers, strip certain groups of public workers of these protections. According to the organizers, higher education workers were excluded from HB 1263 on February 13 after lobbying by university administrators. The Senate bill, for its part, strips home healthcare workers from its provisions, while maintaining protections for higher education workers. The town hall RSVP declares that 37,000 workers seek “rights, protections, equity, dignity and respect on the job” and urges pressure on state lawmakers to rectify the exclusion.

Many of the Democrats now voting to exclude higher education workers from HB 1263 are the same candidates the AFT, National Education Association (NEA), Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and UNITE HERE backed and campaigned for in the 2025 elections. The union apparatus first helped build the very majority now denying collective bargaining rights and is now asking workers to lobby and “pressure” these politicians instead of breaking from this bankrupt framework.

Workers do, indeed, require organization and protections on the job. Roughly half of GMU’s instructors are considered adjunct/non-tenure track, averaging around \$20,000 in yearly pay in a region whose minimum cost of living for single adults is nearly three times that amount, \$65,000 a year, according to MIT’s Living Wage Calculator. An even greater proportion of the campus workforce is employed by private contractors, making even less.

In addition to low pay, workers throughout the United States face growing threats to their democratic rights and endless wars abroad, threatening the very existence of life on earth. Under the Trump administration, Immigration and Customs Enforcement has expanded raids in major cities and targeted international students, including at GMU, as part of Trump’s effort to build an authoritarian dictatorship in the US.

The form of organization advanced at this town hall, however, is a trap, and the experience of similar recent struggles demonstrates where it leads. No faction of the ruling class—Democratic or Republican—is committed to defending democratic rights. Across the country, union bureaucracies aligned with the Democrats have worked to suppress unified action against ICE raids, police repression and austerity.

It is important to note that in many cases the workers listed as the lowest paid at GMU are already unionized. Their union membership has not protected them from exploitation and poverty pay. Instead, it has added another layer of bureaucracy demanding a cut of their paychecks.

In countless cases, the AFT, the SEIU, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), UNITE HERE and other university unions have worked to isolate and betray their members’ struggles. In struggle after struggle, the trade union apparatus has served not as the

defender of workers, but as the chief obstacle to mounting a successful fight. There is a law that can be asserted: the greater the advantage and strength of a workers' struggle, the more directly the union apparatus intervenes to derail it.

This flows from its institutional role as middle-management-style labor contractor, offering employers its services in policing the workforce, not as a force to mobilize workers against the employers, let alone in defense of the democratic and political rights that must be fought for.

In California last week, both the AFT and the NEA intervened to shut down a strike of over 6,000 San Francisco educators, forcing members to take concessionary pay raises of 4 percent in one of the most expensive cities in the country. After the union bureaucracies forced members to accept the low pay raises, the district announced layoffs, cynically citing the cost of the contract as the excuse.

The rapid shutdown of the strike knocked momentum out of a growing wave of class struggle on the West Coast and nationally, which threatened to escape the grip of the well-paid union leaders.

That is only the most recent sellout concocted by the union apparatus. When calls went out in Minneapolis in January for a general strike against Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), union leaders ordered members not to strike, invoking the “no-strike clauses” in contracts they themselves had negotiated. Officials of bodies like the Minneapolis Regional Labor Federation, along with leaders of unions including SEIU Local 26, the Minneapolis Federation of Educators and ATU (Amalgamated Transit Union) Local 1005, explicitly told workers to stay on the job and look for “legal” alternatives instead of walking out. In school districts, teachers were warned not to express solidarity with their students walking out to protest ICE, with one NEA affiliate telling members to “Obey now, grieve later”—that is, keep working and not protest.

The union apparatus' class allegiance extends to GMU. When the Trump administration targeted university president Gregory Washington (salary: \$700,000) over his Diversity, Equity and Inclusion policies, the AAUP and allied faculty rallied to defend him as a symbol of “academic freedom” and DEI. In doing so, they leaned on Virginia Democrats and largely muted their criticism of Washington's own record of repression on campus—attacks on students opposing the Gaza genocide, police and FBI raids against activists, and his endorsement of the IHRA definition of antisemitism, which has been used nationally to chill anti-Zionist speech.

Now, the “Virginia Labor Coalition” is seizing on the existence of a Democratic majority in the state government

to pass a collective bargaining bill that would expand its access to the dues money of all public workers on a statewide level. These efforts unfold following the Virginia election of Democratic Governor Abigail Spanberger, a former CIA operative elevated during the anti-Trump electoral wave. Far from being friends of the working class, these forces embody the fusion of corporate power and the national security apparatus that defines the contemporary Democratic Party. It is in this sinister context that the union apparatus is now trying to tie rising working class anger to the Democratic Party.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality and the Socialist Equality Party call on state workers to reject the union apparatus and its devil's bargain with the Democratic Party. We insist that the basic social force that can resist and stop the state's authoritarianism is the working class, mobilized as a politically independent force against both parties and all representatives of the ruling class.

This requires the building of rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade union apparatus, combining the defense of wages and living standards with the defense of immigrants and democratic rights, and uniting workers across all sectors, schools, workplaces and neighborhoods. At GMU, students should join the IYSSE, the only genuinely socialist organization fighting to mobilize the working class as an independent force against repression and exploitation.

Only through independent organization can workers transform mounting anger into a conscious movement against the capitalist system that produces repression, inequality and war.



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