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# United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, EDUCATION,  
LABOR, AND PENSIONS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6300

September 25, 2025

## VIA ELECTRONIC TRANSMISSION

Jonathan Levin, Ph.D.  
Office of the President  
450 Jane Stanford Way, Building 10  
Stanford University  
Stanford, CA 94305

Ms. Orisa Coombs  
President  
Stanford Graduate Workers Union  
[president@sgwu.us](mailto:president@sgwu.us)

Dear Dr. Levin and Ms. Coombs,

As Chairman of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP), I believe that all institutions should prioritize representing and protecting the interests of workers. I am therefore seriously concerned about reports that may not be the case at Stanford University.

Earlier this year, I understand Stanford University informed at least one graduate student that, if he did not pay dues or agency fees to the Stanford Graduate Workers Union (SGWU), also known as United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) Local 1043, he would be fired from his job as a teaching assistant. Stanford University requires Ph.D. candidates to work as a teaching or research assistant to graduate. Student workers do not have the option to avoid funding the UE, even indirectly, because students are required to pay either dues or agency fees. This firing would bar the student from obtaining a degree for no other reason than his objection to being a member of a union that supports political positions violating his sincerely held religious beliefs.

The SGWU sends two-thirds of all expected dues to UE.<sup>1</sup> The UE supports abortion and taxpayer funded gender transition procedures, positions which run contrary to the religious

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<sup>1</sup> Stanford Graduate Workers Union, "Why are we required to pay dues?," *Frequently Asked Questions*, SGWU, [https://sgwu.us/dues\\_faq/#whydues](https://sgwu.us/dues_faq/#whydues) (last visited Sept. 11, 2025).

beliefs of many people.<sup>2</sup> Forcing student workers to fund such activities has a chilling effect on speech and, presumably, would discourage students with certain religious views from applying to or attending Stanford University.

Student workers should not be compelled to spend their hard-earned dollars funding organizations that use those same funds to advance causes that violate deeply held religious beliefs. To that end, I request answers to the following questions by October 9, 2025:

Interaction of Union Membership with Degree Status and Conferral

1. On the Stanford Department of Economics website, the *Timetable for Doctoral Degree* lists “assist in research and/or teaching” as a step students must complete.<sup>3</sup>
  - a. Is the step to “assist in research and/or teaching” a requirement for graduation or Ph.D. conferral?
  - b. Is there an alternate way of fulfilling the research or teaching requirement if a student is fired because of non-union membership?
2. Why does Stanford require students to be members of a third-party organization in order to graduate?

Union Activities

1. When and how did SGWU make the determination to pressure Stanford University into firing graduate student workers who had not paid union dues or agency fees?
  - a. Please detail each discussion SGWU leadership had internally leading up to their request for Stanford University to fire graduate student workers for non-payment of union dues or agency fees. Please provide copies of relevant communications between SGWU leadership and any supporting documentation.
  - b. Please detail each discussion SGWU leadership had with the UE or other third parties leading up to their request for Stanford University to fire graduate student workers for non-payment of union dues or agency fees. Please provide copies of

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<sup>2</sup> United Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers of American, *UE Policy*, <https://www.ueunion.org/ue-policy> (last visited Sept. 11, 2025).

<sup>3</sup> Stanford University, *Timetable for Doctoral Degree*, Department of Economics, Graduate Degree Program, <https://economics.stanford.edu/graduate/graduate-degree-programs/doctoral-program/timetable-doctoral-degree> (last visited Sept. 11, 2025).

relevant communications between SGWU leadership and UE employees or third parties and any supporting documentation.

- c. Please detail each discussion SGWU leadership had with Stanford University leading up to their request for Stanford University to fire graduate student workers for non-payment of union dues or agency fees. Please provide copies of relevant communications between SGWU leadership and Stanford University and any supporting documentation.
  - d. Where in the collective bargaining agreement between SGWU and Stanford did SGWU assert authority exists to ask Stanford University to fire graduate student workers? In your response, please detail the relevant provision(s).
2. Did SGWU consider that pressuring fellow graduate student workers into paying union dues or agency fees that violate their religious beliefs might create a culture of fear or toxicity on campus?
  - a. Has SGWU either filed or refrained from filing any grievance on behalf of its members if they were subject to the same tactics or pressures used by SGWU from other groups seeking support for any cause?
3. What steps have SGWU and Stanford University taken to ensure the inclusion and protection of graduate student workers whose religious and personal beliefs are incongruent to those of the Union's policies? Please provide relevant documentation.
  - a. What option(s) can these student workers avail themselves of, outside of filing for Title VII religious accommodation? Please describe these options and provide documentation as appropriate.
  - b. If there are no other options, why have SGWU and Stanford not provided any other recourse?
4. When SGWU obtains student contact information, what is the process for determining the frequency of student worker-related communications?
  - a. Please provide any training documents, instructional manuals, or other written policies, directives, or best practices in support of your response.
5. When SGWU obtains student contact information, what is the process for determining the content and tone of student worker-related communications?

- a. Please provide any training documents, instructional manuals, or other written policies, directives, or best practices in support of your response.
6. How does SGWU decide when to increase the number of contacts and severity of the tone in its communications to graduate student workers?
  - a. Please detail, and provide copies of, any established or informal procedures.
7. Does SGWU ever communicate with graduate student workers in person regarding membership in the union or payment of agency fees?
  - a. Does SGWU seek out students who have been ignoring email, text, telephone, or other non-in-person communication?
8. What is SGWU's definition of harassment? When does SWGU leadership decide to stop contacting graduate student workers?

#### Authority for Title VII Exemption

1. Pursuant to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, a person can seek reasonable accommodation for religious practices. The law states: "A refusal to accommodate is justified only when an employer or labor organization can demonstrate that an undue hardship would in fact result from each available alternative method of accommodation. A mere assumption that many more people, with the same religious practices as the person being accommodated, may also need accommodation is not evidence of undue hardship."<sup>4</sup>
  - a. How does SGWU define an undue hardship?
    - i. Please list examples of how non-payment of dues or agency fees would impact the operation of the SGWU.
2. The same law states: "Some collective bargaining agreements include a provision that each employee must join the labor organization or pay the labor organization a sum equivalent to dues. When an employee's religious practices to not permit compliance with such a provision, the labor organization should accommodate the employee by not requiring the employee to join the organization and by permitting him or her to donate a sum equivalent to dues to a charitable organization."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> 29 C.F.R. § 1605.2 (2025).

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

- a. What is the SGWU's definition of "should" in the context of this law?
3. On its website, Stanford University lists all the options available to graduate students: paying union dues and becoming a member; paying agency fees as a "Beck objector"; or seeking a Title VII religious accommodation.<sup>6</sup> However, there is no information regarding Title VII religious accommodations reflected on SGWU's website.
  - a. Is this lack of information inadvertent, or is there a SGWU policy that prohibits the proactive disclosure of this information?
    - i. If SGWU's non-disclosure of this information is intentional, under what circumstances would SGWU inform students of the ability to seek religious accommodation under Title VII?

#### Process for Determining Title VII Exemption

1. Stanford University has indicated that SGWU will determine a graduate student worker's eligibility for a Title VII religious accommodation.
  - a. Please detail how Stanford University and SGWU arrived at this agreement, and what considerations were made during this process.
  - b. Please detail why the SGWU is the right entity to decide the sincerity of a person's religious beliefs.
    - i. Please provide copies of any materials used to support or arrive at this determination.
  - c. Please provide copies of any materials used to determine this such as surveys, questionnaires, and other information gathering documents.
  - d. When information is received from a graduate student worker, what factors and methodology are used to determine the appropriateness of a Title VII religious accommodation?
  - e. Please provide the rubric or framework SGWU uses to rank, score, or otherwise assess the depth of a student's religious beliefs.

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<sup>6</sup> Stanford University, *United Electrical Local 1043, Stanford Graduate Workers Union, Cardinal at Work, Labor Relations & Collective Bargaining*, <https://cardinalatwork.stanford.edu/workplace-essentials/policies/labor-relations-collective-bargaining/united-electrical-local-1043> (last visited Sept. 11, 2025).

- f. Please provide the names and titles of any third parties, including professors; staff from applicable office(s), such as the Institutional Equity, Access & Community office, or others; theologians; seminarians; religious leaders; and legal counsel, you consult in determining whether someone qualifies for a Title VII religious accommodation.
- 2. Which person(s) at SGWU would make this determination?
  - a. If more than one person or a committee, please include the titles of the people making the determination.
  - b. Is there any involvement from UE or any third party in coming to this determination?
    - i. If so, please detail the level of involvement including any process UE follows, who at UE is responsible for making a determination regarding a graduate student worker's Title VII religious accommodation, and what factors they take into account.
  - c. Is the SGWU allowed to overrule UE recommendations regarding Title VII religious accommodations and grant that accommodation, even if not recommended by UE?
- 3. Once the determination regarding a Title VII religious accommodation is made, does the graduate student worker have the right to appeal?
  - a. If so, please describe the appeals process, and provide copies of relevant forms or documents.
- 4. How many times are students allowed to petition the SGWU for a Title VII religious accommodation?
  - a. Does SGWU require students to make a minimum number of petitions before making a determination?

#### Related Matters

- 1. Did Stanford University and/or SGWU consider that the compelled payment of a graduate student worker's dues or fees might cause students to feel unwelcome on their own campus?

2. Graduate student workers who pay agency fees do not have the same privileges as union members. Please describe why agency fees are set for the same amount as union dues.

Sincerely,

Bill Cassidy, M.D.

Bill Cassidy, M.D.

Chairman

U.S. Senate Committee on Health,  
Education, Labor, and Pensions