

Postdocs file for union recognition at University of Michigan

International scholars targeted by Trump administration are among those seeking greater protection.

By [Laurie Udesky](#)

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The University of Michigan in Ann Arbor employs 1,500 postdoctoral scholars — more than 900 of whom have signed a petition for union recognition. Credit: University of College/Shutterstock

Postdoctoral researchers at the University of Michigan have joined thousands of colleagues at other US institutions in seeking union recognition.

Nick Geiser, a theoretical physicist and union organizer at the university in Ann Arbor, says the move was prompted by [US President Donald Trump's election win](#) in November 2024: “It spurred many postdocs into action because our jobs are at stake.”

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On 6 May, the University of Michigan Postdoctoral Researchers Organization (UM-PRO) filed for recognition with the university's Academic Human Resources division after gathering signed authorization cards from more than 900 of the institution's 1,500 postdoctoral scholars.

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“Union campaigns often take years, but UM-PRO obtained a supermajority of signatures in just six months,” Geiser says.

A spokesperson for the University of Michigan did not respond to a request for comment.

Since Trump took office in January, his administration has [slashed billions of dollars in research funding](#) from the US National Institutes of Health (NIH), the National Science Foundation and other agencies – including the money supporting union co-organizer Nikki Rodgers, a biophysicist in the second year of an NIH-funded Institutional Research and Academic Career Development Award fellowship at Michigan. The grant that was set to cover her for another year of research into the spread of breast cancer, as well as teaching students, has been prematurely terminated and will end on 31 July this year instead of in July 2026.



After learning about this, “I went straight home and cried most of the night”, she says.

Her predicament and concern for other researchers motivated Rodgers to sign up to the unionization effort. “A union could be a way to collectively come to the table and say we need to have more protection where we’re not just relying on one faculty member to support our stay,” she says.

Nikki Rodgers joined the unionization

Rodgers’ principal investigator told her

effort after her grant funding was terminated. Credit: University of Michigan Photography

that his group had applied for bridge funding to cover her until January 2026, but nothing had been finalized. With his encouragement, she looked for another job and has secured contract

work as a technical writer in biology.

Power to the people!

The unionization effort at Michigan is part of a growing movement across the United States.

According to a March 2025 study¹ in the *Journal of Collective Bargaining in the Academy*, [seven new postdoctoral 'bargaining units' were created in the United States in 2024](#), representing 7,668 employees – an increase of 67% in terms of total covered workers. Furthermore, 15 new graduate-student bargaining units were created, adding 11,724 graduate students to union rolls.

Geiser and other organizers at the University of Michigan will be fighting for many of the [bread-and-butter issues](#) championed by other postdoctoral and graduate student unions: better pay, health benefits, job security and greater protections for international scholars. According to the university's Postdoctoral Association, more than half of Michigan postdocs in 2022 were international students.

Another signatory to the petition – an international postdoc at the University of Michigan who focuses on diversity, equity and inclusion and requested anonymity to speak freely – says they fear the government could terminate their research and revoke their visa at any moment.

Cuts and border controls

Some [2,100 NIH grants valued at US\\$9.5 billion have been cancelled](#) since Trump took office, including [600 grants worth \\$2.2 billion to Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, alone](#). NIH staff members have been directed to flag grant proposals that use words such as ‘inequity’, ‘racism’ and ‘underserved’, in accordance with [presidential executive orders](#) issued in January.

“There’s so much uncertainty, and that keeps me up at night,” the international postdoc says.

Beyond uneasiness about funding, they are also worried about what will happen when the time comes to renew their visa – a process that will require them to leave the country. “What if I go out and they don’t renew my visa sticker, or I have an issue at the border?” they say.

On 27 May, the Trump administration created a new hurdle for international scholars, directing embassies to [vet the social-media accounts](#) of visa applicants.

The international postdoc hopes that a unionized workforce will be able to negotiate multiyear contracts and visa-renewal subsidies for its members, as other postdoctoral unions have done. The union at the University of California, for example, has won a pledge that all initial appointments will be for at least two years, along with support for immigration issues. Postdocs at Columbia University in New York City have won the right to be reimbursed for up to \$1,250 for visa renewals.

The work of the union is not just about job security and benefits; it is about protecting the safety and rights of postdocs, says Geiser. “A union of 1,500 workers at the university, in line with other unions across the country, can exert a lot of political power.”

doi: <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-025-01828-z>

UPDATES & CORRECTIONS

Correction 02 July 2025: An earlier version of this story misstated Nick Geiser’s specialism; he is a theoretical physicist.

References

1. Herbert, W. A., van der Naald, J. & Apkarian, J.J. *Collect. Bargain. Acad.* **16**, 10 (2025).

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