

# American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations



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## **Statement by AFL-CIO President John Sweeney On the National Labor Relations Board Decision to Deny Graduate Employees Federal Protections to Form Unions and Bargain Collectively July 15, 2004**

This week, in a 3-2 party decision, the Republican majority of the Bush National Labor Relations Board denied tens of thousands of private sector graduate employees important federal protections associated with forming a union and collective bargaining. This deeply flawed decision overturns established precedent set by the National Labor Relations Board in the *New York University* case decided in 2000.

The Board's decision is the wrong one for graduate employees, who are full-fledged workers deserving full-fledged rights, and is a blow to America's working families. Today, graduate assistants carry the majority of the teaching load at many universities, often struggling to raise families on low wages and meager benefits. Thousands of graduate employees at private universities and academic institutions across the country want to form unions to win affordable health care, a fair wage, and a say in their working conditions.

In *Brown University* (341 NLRB No. 4), the Bush board overturned precedent and ignored overwhelming evidence of the transformation of colleges and universities into large-scale employers of low-wage academic workers.

Well-established collective bargaining relationships at universities from coast to coast demonstrate, and studies have shown, that allowing graduate employees to bargain for a decent life does no harm to academic quality or relationships.

In its zeal to limit the reach of the very protections it is charged with nurturing, the Board ignored this evidence, leaving tens of thousands of workers without protection. Unfortunately, these workers are not alone. According to the Government Accountability Office, 32 million workers already have no legal protection to form unions, which internationally recognized human rights organization Human Rights Watch calls a fundamental human rights issue.

However, no flawed Labor Board decision can erase the fact that the freedom to form unions is a fundamental human right. When the government takes away federally sanctioned avenues to form unions, America's workers will organize nonetheless. The 13 million members of the AFL-CIO stand ready to help graduate employees realize their basic human right to have a union and bargain collectively.

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