

UM-PRO FAQ

General (Postdoc Union 101)

What is the University of Michigan Postdoctoral Researchers' Organization (UM-PRO)?

Postdoctoral Research Fellows (Postdocs) are forming a union in order to improve conditions for Postdoc research and work at the University of Michigan (UMich). The work of UMich Postdocs not only drives the research mission at UMich, but also produces diverse scientific knowledge that can benefit the whole world. While UMich Postdocs work across many disciplines and subdisciplines, our dedication to research unites us all.

By forming a union, UMich Postdocs can build a stronger, democratic voice at UMich with more power to negotiate for securing and improving Postdoc rights and working conditions into a legally-binding contract.

Forming a Postdoc union also means joining tens of thousands of other researchers at universities across the country who are already unionized or are currently unionizing, including Postdocs at:

- Albert Einstein College of Medicine,
- California Institute of Technology (Caltech),
- Columbia University,
- Harvard University,
- Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai,
- Johns Hopkins University,
- Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory,
- the National Institutes of Health,
- New York University,
- Princeton University,
- Rutgers University,
- Stanford University,
- University of California (Berkeley, Davis, Irvine, Los Angeles, Merced, Riverside, San Diego, San Francisco, Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz),

- University of Connecticut,
- University of Massachusetts,
- University of Oregon,
- University of Pennsylvania,
- University of Southern California,
- University of Washington,
- and many other universities!

By working together with these and other academic unions across the country, UMich Postdocs can build political power beyond UMich to impact funding, visa, and other policies at the national, state, and local levels that shape the Postdoc experience in academia as scientists and scholars.

Why are Postdocs forming a union at UMich?

Forming a union with collective bargaining rights gives UMich Postdocs the power to negotiate on equal footing with the UMich administration to secure the terms and conditions of Postdoc employment in a legally-binding contract.

Forming a union and joining with thousands of other unionized UMich workers will give UMich Postdocs leverage to improve the working conditions throughout UMich units and job denominations, including raising the standards of salaries, benefits, job security, workplace safety, and more. A united worker front will put UMich Postdocs in a stronger bargaining position and foster a more democratic decision making process around UMich policies.

Moreover, by joining with unionized academic workers nationwide, UMich Postdocs will have a stronger voice on key policy decisions which affect Postdocs and other researchers, such as federal funding for science and federal rules affecting visas and immigration. Unionizing will lead to changes that will create more positive work environments for future Postdocs and improve career pathways for future scientists in the US and beyond.

What is collective bargaining?

Collective bargaining is a process, protected by US law, that equalizes the power relationship between employees and their employer.

Under collective bargaining, UMich Postdocs would elect representatives to negotiate on equal footing with the UMich administration and put the terms of Postdoc employment into a legally-binding contract. Through collective bargaining, Postdocs and other academic workers across the country have successfully negotiated improved wages and benefits; stronger

protections against discrimination and harassment; expanded family-friendly benefits like paid leave and childcare subsidies; and other important provisions.

What is the difference between the University of Michigan Postdoctoral Association (UMPDA) and a union?

Both a strong union like UM-PRO and a Postdoc association like UMPDA can play a critical role in improving the lives of UMich postdocs. UMPDA is a UMich-sponsored organization and provides important opportunities for Postdocs to participate in numerous social and career development opportunities. However, UMPDA is not a viable alternative to a union. While UMPDA can make recommendations to the institution on behalf of postdocs, it cannot legally engage in collective bargaining. Unions like UM-PRO and associations like UMPDA often work together at academic institutions. In fact, many UMPDA members actively support UM-PRO.

How can I support the efforts to form our union and win a strong contract?

UMich Postdocs will build a strong union and win enforceable workplace protections through majority participation and one-to-one organizing. Postdocs in every department, building, and lab will talk to their coworkers and friends about forming a union and winning a strong contract.

Should I support forming a union even if I'm happy with my working conditions at UMich?

Yes! By organizing in their labs and departments, Postdocs can preserve the positive aspects of their workplace and also have a collective voice to push back on negative policy and contract changes proposed by the UMich administration. Even Postdocs with supportive and well-intentioned supervisors can be negatively affected by UMich administration in ways that neither a supervisor nor department administration can anticipate or solve. Postdocs can also get unlucky and find themselves victims of a toxic work climate or unfair workplace dynamics. With a union, Postdocs can stand by each other and will have the collective power of their coworkers behind them to enforce their contract and to ensure their workplace rights are respected. In sum, having a union-negotiated contract can protect Postdocs and their colleagues from negative policies and toxic environments.

Should I support this campaign even if I will leave before the first contract is bargained?

Yes! UM-PRO is part of a broader movement of research workers to make all research workplaces better. All current Postdocs should sign a union card to be counted in the majority. If you are no longer a UMich Postdoc, you can still support the effort by asking your former colleagues to sign a union authorization card.

Can UMich, or my advisor or PI, retaliate against me for supporting the formation of UM-PRO?

Under federal law, it is [illegal to retaliate against an employee](#) for organizing a labor union at their workplace. Thus far, UM-PRO organizers are not aware of any cases of higher educational institutions taking action against Postdocs for signing a union authorization card or voting in favor of forming a union.

Does forming a union politicize science?

Science is already affected by politics. Federal science funding, healthcare access, immigrant rights, and other issues regularly affect Postdocs' ability to do their research. By forming a union, Postdocs can use their collective power to influence political issues that affect them.

"I consider it important, indeed urgently necessary, for intellectual workers to get together, both to protect their own economic status and, also, generally speaking, to secure their influence in the political field."

- Albert Einstein, on why he joined the faculty union at Princeton as a charter member

How can UMich Postdocs form a union?

What are union authorization cards?

At UMich, new unions can be formed by a process called a "[card check](#)." Workers, such as UMich Postdocs, can create a form expressing a worker's intent to be represented by a union, called a union authorization card (or "union card"). If a simple majority (50% + 1) of UMich Postdocs sign union authorization cards, then UMich administration will recognize their union. If there are any disagreements about the job titles included in the new union, Postdocs can negotiate with UMich administration to determine the specific list of represented job titles. After this recognition process, Postdocs will collectively bargain their first contract with UMich.

What is a bargaining unit? Would I be included in the UM-PRO?

A bargaining unit is a group of workers who share a similar job description and common community interests, represented in collective bargaining by the same labor union. For purposes of the card collection campaign, the UM-PRO bargaining unit consists of all Postdoctoral Research Fellows (Postdocs) who currently work at UMich. There are approximately 1500 Postdocs on campus, split roughly equally between Central Campus, North Campus, and the Medical Campus / Michigan Medicine.

What is the path to our first contract?

After UMich admin recognizes UM-PRO, UM Postdocs will start the process of negotiating a contract with UMich:

- UMich Postdocs will elect a Postdoc Bargaining Committee of their peers.
- The Postdoc Bargaining Committee will distribute bargaining surveys to all UMich Postdocs.
- Based on these surveys, the Postdoc Bargaining Committee will develop initial bargaining goals, and UMich Postdocs will vote to ratify these goals.
- The Postdoc Bargaining Committee will meet with UMich administration representatives to negotiate a contract in pursuit of the bargaining goals.
- After the Postdoc Bargaining Committee has negotiated a tentative agreement with UMich admin, all UMich Postdocs will vote whether to ratify the agreement as a first contract. If UMich Postdocs are unsatisfied with the tentative agreement, they can vote against it and return to the negotiating table.

Throughout this process, the Postdoc Bargaining Committee will be aided by experienced negotiators and legal representatives. After the contract is ratified, UMich Postdocs will elect representatives who will ensure that UMich does not violate the terms of the contract and who will represent UMich Postdocs with grievances or other workplace issues.

What are union dues and when would we start paying?

Membership dues (or “union dues”) are small fees collected from workers who choose to be represented by a union contract. These dues are important because they provide the resources necessary for effective representation. Dues are critical for providing UMich Postdocs with independent resources that are not controlled by the University. UM-PRO will use dues to ensure UMich Postdocs have appropriate legal, bargaining, community, and staff support to represent all postdoctoral researchers. Dues are generally a small fraction of the gross salary (between 1% and 2%), but the precise amount will be collectively discussed and decided upon once UM-PRO wins its card check campaign and democratically ratifies its first contract.

UMich Postdocs will not pay any dues until their first contract is ratified and they sign up as UM-PRO members.

The value of increased wages and benefits in the first contract typically outweighs the cost of dues, often leading to overwhelming majority approval of those agreements. For example, the Columbia postdocs went from having the lowest minimum salaries for postdocs in NYC to the highest in the first year of their contract, an increase of between 14.5% to 20%, along with guaranteed annual increases and other improvements. The base wages for UC postdocs have gone up by more than 50% since they ratified their first contract in 2010.

International Postdocs

Can international Postdocs join or participate in UM-PRO?

Yes! If you are working in the US, you have a right to join and participate in a union, regardless of your immigration status or visa. International Postdocs have the same legal right to join a union as US citizens. Visa requirements in no way compromise a Postdoc's right to join a union. Tens of thousands of international Postdocs have become union members at dozens of American universities for decades.

Thus far, UM-PRO organizers are not aware of any cases of higher educational institutions taking action against international Postdocs for signing a union authorization card or voting in favor of forming a union.

How can international Postdocs benefit from joining UM-PRO?

Postdoc unions are powerful organizations that consistently advocate to improve conditions for international researchers. Unions helped lead the fight against Executive Orders issued by former President Trump that targeted international scholars and students. Postdoc unions provide more resources for researchers on visas at the local level. Unions over the country have fought for international researchers who could not return to the US during the COVID-19 pandemic to be able to work remotely from abroad. International researchers in other unionized workplaces have found that their union is one of their most effective ways to have a voice in US policies that affect them.

Could joining UM-PRO impact applications for permanent residence (green card) or any other aspect of a person's immigration status?

International Postdocs have the same legal rights as US citizens with respect to union membership, and under US law, it is illegal to discriminate based on union membership. Thus, signing a union card will not jeopardize or delay any immigration process including application for legal permanent residence. Tens of thousands of international Postdocs have become union members at dozens of American universities for decades, without any reported instance of immigration processing delay as a result of their union membership.

Impact of Unionizing on UMich Postdocs

What improvements have Postdocs bargained for at other universities?

Other Unionized Postdocs have negotiated improvements to their salaries, benefits, family-friendly policies, and workspaces; have established fair processes for addressing sexual and other forms of discrimination and harassment; and have negotiated greater job stability and protections for international researchers.

Read more about what Postdocs have won at other universities:

- [University of California Postdocs \(UAW Local 5810\)](#)
- [University of Washington Postdocs \(UAW Local 4121\)](#)
- [Columbia University Postdoctoral Researchers \(UAW Local 4100\)](#)
- [University of Connecticut Postdocs \(UAW Local 6950\)](#)

Can a union guarantee any specific improvements?

UMich Postdocs will democratically prioritize which improvements to pursue in their contract negotiations, and they will vote to ratify that contract. With a union, UMich Postdocs will negotiate as equals with UMich administration for the changes that they want to make. A contract will legally secure those improvements against any unilateral changes. Currently, the administration can change policies and benefits unilaterally, without consulting those affected.

How can UM-PRO improve issues of equity and inclusion?

Postdocs who belong to marginalized and underrepresented groups often face disproportionate barriers in their academic careers. Forming a union is the best way to address issues with equity and inclusion in science. Unions can win enforceable protections against discrimination and harassment. Without a union, policies protecting marginalized and underrepresented groups depend wholly on their institution's willingness to enforce them.

There are many systems academic unions use to protect workers on issues of equity and inclusion:

- Union contracts can codify protections for groups of workers (e.g. paid parental, paid disability leave, and accommodations for disabled researchers) into their initial contracts.
- Union contracts can provide specific definitions of what constitutes discrimination or harassment.
- [Unions can operate grievance committees](#) that give advice, social support, and legal support to workers facing discrimination and harassment.
- Unions can introduce contractual procedures to use third party groups to facilitate and streamline grievance processes (e.g. [unions adopting a third-party process to resolve Title IX cases](#)).

While bargaining their first contract, UMich Postdocs will create resources and bargaining agendas for international Postdocs, Postdocs with disabilities, Postdocs who are historically racially marginalized in academia, LGBTQ+ Postdocs, Postdocs with dependents or caring responsibilities (e.g., family, neighbor), and all other marginalized Postdocs. After ratifying their first contract, UMich Postdocs will create committees to address issues and contract violations

faced by all marginalized Postdoc groups. These committees will work to protect the rights of UMich Postdocs based on a range of equality issues including gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion, income, health, and family status.

Will forming a union limit Postdocs' direct relationship with supervisors?

UMich Postdocs will negotiate with UMich admin—not with PIs or supervisors—because campus policies define the working conditions of Postdoc employment at UMich. Moreover, UMich Postdocs will set their bargaining agenda and decide what improvements to prioritize in collective bargaining. As such, a union contract would only create limitations if UMich Postdocs democratically choose to impose them. Moreover, forming a union would mean that UMich admin would not be able to make unilateral changes to working conditions that Postdocs choose to preserve.

In addition, many PIs appreciate working with unionized researchers because a union contract means PIs do not have to negotiate every term and condition of employment (from wages, to healthcare, to leave, to childcare, to non-discrimination protections, to vacation, to appointment letter terms, etc.) and instead can focus on their research.

Will the formation of a union or increased pay result in fewer Postdoc jobs?

UM-PRO organizers have not seen the number of Postdoc jobs decrease at any institution with unionized Postdocs.

Both UMich Postdocs and UMich admin want a contract that preserves the high quality of research at UMich. Collective bargaining allows UMich Postdocs to negotiate on an equal footing with UMich admin to hold the university accountable to do the best that it can do. While bargaining, UMich Postdocs will have greater access to UMich's financial information, which will make it possible for the Postdoc Bargaining Team to be well-informed and conscientious while bargaining. UMich Postdocs will democratically decide what pay increases to ask for in bargaining and will vote to ratify their contract.

Where will the money come from for pay increases?

Currently, UMich admin unilaterally determines Postdoc pay rates and benefits. Those rates are factored into grant proposals to agencies like the NIH or NSF which currently pay postdoc salaries. Any improvements to pay rates would continue to be factored into future grant proposals. Any gaps between old salaries and new salaries in current grants can be paid by UMich through a variety of means. Postdocs at many other universities have used this process to negotiate guaranteed annual increases to their pay rates through collective bargaining.

Can departments and PIs voluntarily pay above negotiated pay rates?

UMich Postdocs will democratically decide how to negotiate their pay, but no academic worker contract has ever stipulated that all workers must be paid the same. Instead, academic union

contracts have established minimum rights on different aspects of researcher working conditions, while preserving the ability of PIs and Postdocs to negotiate above those minimums. At both Columbia and the University of California, for example, Postdocs negotiated pay scales that guarantee minimum salaries but stipulate that the institution may pay more.

Will we have to strike?

With a union, all union decisions—including the decision about whether or not to strike—will be made democratically by UMich Postdocs. With a union, Postdocs will collectively decide what to ask for in bargaining and whether or not a strike is necessary.

A strike is a very powerful tool for unionized workers, but a strike would only occur if union members decide a strike is necessary. The decision to strike is made collectively: two-thirds of workers participating in a strike authorization vote must vote yes in order to authorize a strike. While a strike is most effective if workers all participate, it is an individual decision (protected by the First Amendment to the US Constitution) whether or not to do so.