

# Detroit Free Press

## Judge to weigh bid for unionization from University of Michigan graduate student research assistants

A group of University of Michigan graduate student research assistants now must persuade a judge to allow them to form a union.

The Michigan Employment Relations Commission, on a 2-1 margin, voted this morning to send the question to an administrative law judge for a hearing. If the students win there, they will be allowed to have an election.

At issue is whether the GSRAs are employees or just students. If deemed employees, they're allowed to unionize. A 1981 MERC ruling says they are students, a precedent the students are trying to reverse.

The group argues that GSRAs are paid by the university, do research that brings generates income for the university and that they get benefits, like regular employees. They say much has changed since 1981.

The efforts to unionize roughly 2,100 graduate student research assistants could have implications for thousands of other graduate assistants at Michigan's other public universities.

The issue has been contentious. It has split U-M, pitting administrators versus the Board of Regents.

The Mackinac Center for Public Policy has also been

recruited to represent some GSRAs who don't want to unionize. Last month, Michigan Attorney General Bill Schuette weighed in, asking to be allowed to become a party to the case to argue against unionization.

The commission voted against allowing Schuette or the Mackinac Center from becoming a party, but the board will allow them to submit evidence to the administrative law judge.

Caren Weinhouse, a spokesman for the GRSA pushing for unionization, said they were pleased with the opportunity to present evidence and argue that GSRAs are employees.

Mackinac Center attorney Patrick Wright said the move freezes out those GSRAs who don't want to be unionized.

Even though U-M administrators, including President Mary Sue Coleman, oppose unionization, the Board of Regents voted to let an election go forward. That became the official position of U-M, a fact Wright argues means everybody who is an official party to the action is arguing for unionization.

*Contact David Jesse: 313-222-8851 or [djesse@freepress.com](mailto:djesse@freepress.com).*