



MERC Upholds Graduate Student Ruling

The Michigan Employment Relations Commission has reaffirmed its 1981 ruling that graduate assistants are students, not university employees, and so do not have the right to form a union.

In an order issued Thursday, the commission found that nothing had factually changed since its earlier ruling that graduate student research assistants are not employees of the university.

In the case (University of Michigan and Graduate Employees Organization, case No. R11 D-034), the university and the some graduate assistants agreed that they were employees, but other graduate students and Attorney General Bill Schuette had urged the commission to stick to its earlier ruling.

The university and the students supporting unionization had argued that the research assistants are not treated more like employees than they were in 1981, and there are substantially more of them.

“Although we may not have articulated this well in our 1981 decision, we conclude that was the relationship between the GSRAs’ research work and their academic goals, and not whether their efforts benefited the University, that led us to conclude in 1981 that the GSRAs were ‘working for them-

selves,’” the commission said in its order. “[I]t was not the Legislature’s intent when it adopted PERA to give students the right to collectively bargain with their teachers.”

The graduate assistants said the unanimous decision of the commission was essentially political.

“We are not surprised that a board full of Governor (Rick Snyder’s) appointees would go out of their way to attack the rights of working people,” Brandon Valentine, a graduate student in the Psychology Department at U-M and co-chair of GEO’s Communications Committee, said. “This unnecessary ruling by MERC serves no other purpose than to insert the politics of an unelected body into higher education. GEO stands by the fact that GSRAs are employees of the university and deserve to have their collective bargaining rights recognized.”

But the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, which had represented graduate students opposed to the agreement, praised the decision. “We’re pleased that MERC recognized that our clients are students and not employees,” Patrick Wright, Mackinac Center’s vice president for legal affairs, said. “They were simply trying to further their education.”