

October 30, 2019

To: Karl Scholz, Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs; Ian Robertson, Dean of the College of Engineering; Susan Hagness, Chair of the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering

We represent graduate, academic staff, and faculty workers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. We write to you in response to the news and campus discussion of the death of John Brady, a research assistant in the College of Engineering from 2010 to 2016.

Our communities were saddened by the news three years ago when this happened and we are reliving that sadness after the most recent article was published documenting the terrible events that led to John's death. This letter is an attempt to better understand the university's response and a reminder to our administrators of how important it is that workers have a meaningful voice in crafting the policies that will govern their workplace and protect them from abuse. Our insistence stems from a desire to prevent these tragedies by giving a voice to the people who know their working conditions.

Your response to local news coverage of this event emphasized the importance of mental health and options for graduate students to seek related services. We commend the university for expanding such services. In centering individual mental health, however, you erase the conditions in which John worked, the real and significant impact working conditions have on mental health, and the responsibility supervisors have to create safe environments.

Your response has also emphasized an expansion of departmental positions and services oriented toward graduate students. We strongly support increased visibility of graduate students and their issues. Yet instead of empowering graduate students, these positions and services operate within existing hierarchies. They are designed to address student and worker issues on an individual basis and minimize their visibility. These are the very conditions that created and tolerated the abusive environment in the Wireless Communication and Sensing Laboratory where John worked.

Your response noted increases in pay and standardized policies for graduate workers. We stand for fair compensation and policies that protect workers and enable us to fulfill our research, teaching, and service missions. Our union members have fought for these values. Yet many of us are offered contingent appointments of less than 50% while we work well over 40 hours per week. Current university policy prohibits some graduate workers from grieving such overwork. Current university policy for research assistants does not exist.

Email communication that you provided to the graduate student and College of Engineering communities did not include information about Akbar Sayeed, the faculty member who supervised the Wireless Communication and Sensing Laboratory and will return to his position. We support protections around tenure and job security for all workers on campus; we support collaborating with employees to improve job performance. We also support the right of all workers on campus to feel safe and their right to transparent communication about their working conditions.

We call on you to provide answers to the following questions:

- *How were members of the College of Engineering, including graduate students, university staff, academic staff and faculty, involved in the decision to reinstate Akbar Sayeed?*
- *When and how will you communicate to the graduate student and College of Engineering communities that Akbar Sayeed will return to his position?*
- *How will you inform future graduate workers in the Wireless Communication and Sensing Laboratory of the history of an unsafe work environment?*
- *When and how will you release to the graduate student and College of Engineering communities the report prepared by Patricia Wolleat?*

In closing, we wish to recognize that this particular discussion is more than three years overdue. We urge you to hear the voices of workers on this campus moving forward.

Sincerely,

Robert Christl, Co-President, Teaching Assistants Association, Local 3220, AFT, AFL-CIO

Sara Trongone, Co-President, Teaching Assistants Association, Local 3220, AFT, AFL-CIO

Alyssa Franze, President, United Faculty and Academic Staff, Local 223, AFT, AFL-CIO

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