

**U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Education and Labor**

**Written Testimony of
Ludmila Tyler, PhD**

**Submitted for the field hearing on
“Understanding Problems in First Contract
Negotiations: Post-Doctoral Scholar
Bargaining at the University of California”**

**Berkeley, California
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Good morning Chairman Miller, Congresswoman Lee and Congresswoman Woolsey. Thank you for holding this hearing and for inviting me to testify. My name is Ludmila Tyler. I am a postdoctoral researcher in the Plant and Microbial Biology Department at UC Berkeley. My research focuses on a grass species, with the goal of improving plants used to make biofuels. I am excited about my work and the opportunity to contribute to the development of green energy.

I have been a postdoctoral researcher at UC Berkeley since the fall of 2006. My colleagues and I are dedicated to our work and committed to being part of the University community. We have found it necessary to unionize in order to improve our working conditions and to create more stability in our postdoctoral appointments. Specifically, we hope to achieve significant, regular, and transparent salary increases, so that we can support ourselves and our families; longer and more stable appointments, to ensure job security for more than a few months at a time; improved health benefits for ourselves and our families; and more family-friendly policies such as better child-bearing, parental and family leaves. I will try to explain, with examples from my own experience, why these changes are critically important to postdocs.

I have two Bachelor's degrees, a Duke University Ph.D., and three-and-a-half years of experience beyond the Ph.D. My current salary is \$37,400 per year. Although I have been a postdoc at UC Berkeley for three-and-a-half years, my salary only meets the minimum of the UC postdoctoral pay scale. Especially in places like the Bay area, where the cost of living is high, it is challenging to cover basic expenses with \$37,400 a year. The challenge grows when one is providing for a child. I have an 18-month-old son, and I do not want my pursuit of a career in science to be a disadvantage for him.

As a postdoc, I have had appointments of nine months, eleven months, two months, another nine months, and now – finally – twelve months. The short-term nature of these appointments creates tremendous insecurity in my life, because I can never predict with confidence whether I will have a job in a few months' time.

In fact, after less than two years at Berkeley, I unexpectedly lost my job. Approximately a year after I started my first postdoctoral position, my supervisor approved a pay increase for me; in my department, a pay raise of this type, *i.e.* after one year instead of two, is generally reserved for outstanding job performance. Several months later, my supervisor stated that my position would

be funded for at least another 18 months, and we discussed correspondingly long-term project plans. I was hesitant to tell my employer that I was pregnant, but given her positive evaluation of my work and her assurance concerning funding, I made the announcement. Shortly thereafter, my supervisor told me that there had been a change: there was no longer funding for my position; it would end on the last day of the month (June 30, 2008). When pressed, my supervisor assured me that the decision had nothing to do with my performance, which she maintained was excellent. She said that there was simply no longer funding for me.

I immediately attempted to find out what my options were – for example, what would happen to my health insurance. When I explained my situation to an administrator at Berkeley, his response was first “Oh, lord” and then “You should focus on finding another job. Don’t cause trouble. The scientific community is very small, and you’re likely to regret it if you burn your bridges.”

Fortunately, the head of another lab hired me as a postdoc, but my accumulated time off disappeared and my sick days were drastically reduced. The university informed me of the reduction in sick days the week I came home from the hospital and instructed me to “please plan accordingly.” I was able to fight to have the sick days reinstated but lost several weeks of time off. Because I could not use the time off I had previously saved to cover part of my maternity leave, I lost a significant portion of my pay. Changing postdoctoral positions also disrupted my health insurance coverage, causing additional stress.

When I returned to work after maternity leave, I wanted to continue feeding my infant son but, to do so, needed access to a private room. I was given a dusty, vacant office with a defective door lock and a glass wall opening into the main administrative office. I had to clean the unused space myself, arrange to have the lock fixed, and buy a curtain to cover the glass.

It is important to note that this statement is not about any one individual. It is not about my previous supervisor (to whom I wish only the best) or about a particular administrator or department. It is not even about me. I am here today because the issues of low pay, job insecurity, poor benefits, and a lack of family-friendly policies affect all UC postdocs. The hardships created by these conditions force far too many of us to ask: “Can I afford to continue on this career path? Will I be able to support myself? Will I be able to support my family?” Each month that UC does not agree to a fair contract with the union, these questions persist.

Postdocs are some of the nation's best-educated workers. Yet, one of the biggest leaks in the scientific pipeline is at the postdoctoral level, particularly for women. At a time when the US is trying to improve its global competitiveness, can we really afford to have that leak?

Settling a first union contract will not solve all the problems experienced by postdocs. It is not a magic fix. I am, however, hopeful that a union-negotiated contract will prevent many of the regrettable circumstances which currently confront UC postdocs and will also provide a mechanism for addressing problems when they do occur. A fair contract will be a significant, concrete step in the right direction.

Thank you very much for taking an interest in University of California postdocs and our efforts to improve our professional lives by negotiating a collective bargaining agreement.