

Opinion: What lessons are we teaching at George Mason University about justice?

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Three weeks into his term as president of George Mason University, Gregory Washington launched an ambitious racial justice initiative and established a Task Force on Anti-Racism and Inclusive Excellence. Made up of more than 100 faculty, staff and students, the task force was charged with identifying “systems, practices, and traditions of racial bias [that] exist at George Mason University so that we may eradicate them” and “build intentional systems and standards of anti-racism that will keep racial injustices from regenerating.” As Washington notes, this work is necessary if we are to advance justice in higher education.

We agree. And if this work is to be truly transformative, it must include the entire Mason [community](#) — including contracted custodial workers. However, we have recently learned about several troubling accounts of contracted-worker exploitation at Mason, affecting mainly immigrant workers. As reported in [Bloomberg Law](#), a GMU

janitorial contractor has now [settled](#) two claims over worker allegations of intimidation and harassment.

The latest complaint, filed with the National Labor Relations Board in November, accused the contractor of “intimidating workers, sabotaging work areas, making false accusations of theft, physically shoving a worker, and slow-walking a worker’s paycheck.” In an earlier settlement with the same contractor, complaints were filed “over retaliation against workers who supported forming a union.” That claim accused the contractor of “unlawfully surveilling” workers and “laying off an employee who was seen talking to union organizers.” Two workers who were witnesses to the conduct in the unfair labor practices claim were recently fired.

According to local labor leaders, there are other troubling [examples of exploitation](#) and workplace abuses with contractors at Mason, including wage theft in the building trades. These kinds of workplace abuses are common in the industry, necessitating clear policy guidance and consequences for bad actors. We understand that Washington and his staff are aware of these labor issues. So far, however, it remains unclear whether university leadership is going to end GMU’s contracts with abusive contractors and commit to a responsible contractor policy.

So what lessons are we teaching at Mason about justice?

As is the case across the region, many GMU contracted workers — janitorial staff, food services workers, building tradespeople — are immigrants. Many are paid low wages and live in precarious circumstances, in overcrowded housing and in fear of detainment, deportation and family separation. They are vulnerable to employment abuses and exploitation. As Washington’s words aptly describe, “the uncomfortable truth is not everyone at Mason feels equal, or is treated equally.”

To fight labor injustice, a pernicious form of structural racism, we have formed the GMU Coalition for Worker Rights. We want GMU to adopt a responsible contractor policy that requires better working conditions (including living wages, health-care benefits, training and apprenticeship opportunities) for Mason's contracted workforce. Mason should also ensure that all workers are provided with appropriate personal protective equipment to carry out their jobs safely. Contracted custodial workers should not have to provide their own equipment.

Washington stated that his vision is to establish GMU "as a national exemplar of anti-racism and inclusive excellence in action." To advance this vision, Mason's racial justice efforts must center on the margins, upholding the rights and dignity of workers who are keeping our campus safe and clean and helping us grow, especially during a public health crisis that is disproportionately burdening the immigrant community. We can never be a national exemplar if we as an institution are complicit in the exploitation and abuse of the most vulnerable workers on our campuses. This cannot be the Mason lesson.

As [the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote](#): "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." Under Washington's leadership, Mason must show its commitment to the public good by cleaning up bad contracts and implementing a responsible contractor policy. The GMU Coalition for Worker Rights stands ready to make Washington's vision a reality for all.