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Congressional Staffer Briefing
Sandesh Adhikary

Hello, everyone. Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today about my personal experiences as an F1 student. My name is Sandesh Adhikary, and I am a PhD student at the University of Washington. I have been on an F1 visa for the past nine years - since 2011 when I arrived in the US as an undergraduate student. I am here also as a representative of the International Solidarity Workgroup of UAW 4121, the union of 6000 academic student employees and post doctoral researchers, about 30% of whom are international students and scholars.

I want to start by talking about the onslaught of attacks on international scholars that we've been dealing with in our union workgroup over the past few months - because I think it is representative of the anxiety and frustration international students across the US have been experiencing for quite some time now. In January, we were reaching out to our Iranian-American members, checking to see if any of them or their loved ones had been detained at the border. In March, we were frantically identifying if any of our international scholars were stuck abroad due to the new round of travel bans that had just been introduced. In early April, we were working to ensure that the recent uncertainties created by the COVID-19 pandemic did not jeopardize job appointments of our international scholars, for many of whom staying in the US is contingent on their employment (and who were, for the most part, not receiving federal assistance). While we were still wrapping our heads around the pandemic, the Trump administration introduced new proposed rules in April barring the provision of green cards and work visas, which many international scholars rely on to live and work in the US. In June, we found ourselves checking in with our Chinese members to make sure they were not being impacted by the new Chinese grad student ban that seemingly came out of nowhere. While we were still coming to terms with this new rule, a new round of executive orders suspended H1-B, H2-B, L1, and J-visas. This brings us to July, when, just this week ICE announced its latest rule attacking international students on F1 visas. This year, there has been a fresh attack on international scholars almost every single month. Keep in mind that we have been dealing with all of this alongside often very demanding academic and research commitments, while in the midst of a pandemic - worrying about the health of our loved ones, uncertain when we'll be able to see them next.

As an international student navigating through all of these hurdles, it is very difficult not to feel unwelcome and unwanted. Every few weeks, there seems to be a new rule creating roadblocks for us to study and work. This is despite everything that international students contribute to academia and the economy of the US. Within our union alone, 30% of the 5000 academic student employees and close to 40% of post-doctoral researchers are international scholars. This includes teaching assistants, who provide

close to half of the instructional contact with undergraduate students. This includes student research assistants who are responsible for a majority of the nation's research output. This includes research scientists who drive groundbreaking discoveries. This includes Postdocs, who have attained their PhDs at the world's most elite universities and then choose to come here to contribute to UW and the broader U.S. community. Without international scholars, research and instruction at most US universities simply cannot function. We are responsible for the day to day work that produces groundbreaking research on COVID-19, and really every medical condition, as well as many critical social issues ranging from combating climate change to understanding racism to engineering bridges. Multiple studies have already shown that immigrants and non-citizen workers drive job creation in the U.S. 55% of America's billion-dollar startups have at least one immigrant founder - and of those, 22% came here as international students. With the constant attacks on their ability to study in the US, international students will eventually begin to look towards other countries. This won't make America stronger, and it won't help us through the current recession.

This most recent attack on international students makes us feel expendable. We feel like we are being used as political pawns in an attempt to force colleges and universities to reopen, risking people's lives with in-person instruction. Each of the 1.1 million international students in the US is anxious about what will happen to them in the next few months. We're worried about whether we'll need to leave our homes and schools, and in some cases leave our partners and children; whether we can afford to break our housing leases since we don't know when we'll be able to come back; whether we'll be able to attend online classes at 3 in the morning due to time differences when we're no longer in the US. Some of these questions are even more difficult to tackle - will we contract COVID-19 in transit and eventually spread it to our families? If we cannot come back in time, will we have to abandon our education, which we've invested so much time and money into? Will we even be able to make it home with all the travel restrictions that are in place? This recent rule is not only taking a toll on the mental well-being of international students, but will also likely worsen the pandemic. Forcing thousands of international students to go back to their home countries right now will do nothing but exacerbate the spread of COVID-19 throughout the world.

International students are being faced with an impossible choice. If our schools opt to go fully online, we must go back to our home countries and risk contracting COVID-19 in transit or by going back into communities already struggling to contain it's spread. If our schools opt a hybrid model, we are forced to take in-person classes, once again exposing ourselves to contracting COVID-19. Apart from our health, this also puts at risk the health of faculty members who are now pressured to hold in-person classes to accommodate their international students. The provisions in this current rule are as confusing as they are cruel. For students who wish to remain in the country, the proposed solution is to simply transfer to a different school offering in-person courses. Most of us who came to the US, came here for a specific degree program offered at a

specific school. We do not take our education lightly. We've spent years studying and preparing to get to the colleges and universities we are in; we've built invaluable networks with our peers and faculty. We cannot be expected to simply start from scratch so easily. Even if we were to do so, the logistics simply do not work out. Most colleges are no longer accepting admissions. For many of us, going to school is contingent on finding stipends, financial aid, and on-campus jobs, which are the only form of employment available to us due to our F1 visa restrictions. So we'd not only need to find a college willing to take us, but also one that can guarantee financial security - all within a short month or so. Even if we were somehow able to find such a university to transfer to, it's still possible that our new school transitions to online instruction, forcing us to repeat the process all over again.

As a final note, I'd like to reiterate that this latest decision from ICE has brought undue stress and anxiety amid existing difficulties of navigating a pandemic. All international scholars in the US have learned to live with uncertainty to some extent. This is because there has never been a list we can check-off which would guarantee our visa status since much of US immigration is discretionary. We thus learn to become extremely cautious - we become hyper aware that we not just follow all rules applicable to us but steer clear of anything that could even be perceived as non-compliance. But right now, it feels impossible to even plan for anything. As we've seen this past year, a rule can be imposed overnight, that, with no fault of our own, can force us to abandon our education, upending years of planning and investment. The current ICE ruling is just the latest in a sequence of rules over the past few years that make it difficult for international students to study and live in the US. I urge everyone here to not only oppose this latest rule, but push to add further protections for international students and scholars. Our Union, UAW, is committed to helping where we can. Please don't hesitate to reach out to me if I can help you get in touch with international students and scholars in your districts or we can provide additional information.

