



**Testimony on Behalf of the University of Maine System
by University of Maine President Joan Ferrini-Mundy in Support of LD 1816, *An Act To Promote Labor Education Through the University of Maine System*– Jan. 12, 2022**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education & Cultural Affairs: My name is Joan Ferrini-Mundy and I am the President of the University of Maine and its regional campus in Machias. I am here today representing the University of Maine System (UMS), for which I also serve as Vice Chancellor for Research & Innovation, to speak on LD 1816, *An Act To Promote Labor Education Through the University of Maine System*.

I want to begin by thanking this Committee for its ongoing support and engagement of our public universities. You recently heard from Chancellor Malloy and will no doubt continue to hear from him and others this session that our System is facing extraordinary financial challenges. As we have held the line on tuition for Maine students, modest increases in our State appropriation – while greatly appreciated – have not kept pace with our rising operational costs, driven largely by bargained compensation. Meanwhile, UMS is burdened by one of higher education's oldest physical plants in the nation with a \$1.3 billion backlog of deferred maintenance and imminent infrastructure need. And at a time when research and innovation is essential to equitable health, education, environmental and economic outcomes, State investment in public university R&D through the Maine Economic Improvement Fund, known as MEIF, has been flat since FY16 despite its more than 5:1 return.

Given this context, the System's priorities in this and upcoming sessions will be strategically focused on additional appropriations that address these core needs essential to our ability to deliver on our mission and meet our obligations to our students, employees and the people of Maine. We will rarely advocate for policy and investment that could compete with those core needs for limited public resources or require us to take on commitments we cannot reasonably sustain long-term – including those that are not supported by enrollment/participation projections and could further challenge our capacity to compensate our faculty and staff fairly.

Consistent with our land grant designation, UMaine is proud of its long history providing education, research and public service that recognizes, supports and empowers working Mainers. In the 1960s, an appropriation from the Legislature helped establish the Bureau of Labor Education (BLE) at UMaine to provide education and training to working Mainers, both organized and unorganized. While there is no longer targeted State funding to support its work, the BLE continues activities and is housed within our Division of Lifelong Learning. This includes documenting and disseminating information about the state's rich labor history and providing Maine workers and their representatives access to knowledge and resources for understanding and productively dealing with work-related challenges and opportunities under ever-changing labor law and conditions. BLE also offers two online labor studies courses for our students – including the handful enrolled in the labor studies minor and track supported in part by the Bureau.

We appreciate Speaker Fecteau's support of the BLE, and of working people, including those employed by our public universities. We recognize that with directed funding, we could sustain and even expand and enhance that support statewide. The thoughtful proposal to honor one of our outstanding UMaine faculty researchers, Dr. Charles Scontras, who passed away last March after more than 50 years of distinguished public service, is especially meaningful to many in the university community. We respectfully request the Committee's support of the Speaker's

amendment to instead charge UMS Trustees, who typically have authority in such matters, to initiate new programming and name the Scontras Center.

Additionally, we would like to remind you that last session, the Legislature established a pilot student achievement, workforce and economic university research institute modeled after MEPRI (the Maine Education Policy Research Institute). We are in the early days of developing this in partnership with IDEA Committee, but the new institute may be able to address some of the nonpartisan labor-related research needs that have been identified by proponents of this bill.

Given worsening workforce shortages, our growing collective commitment to addressing long-standing inequalities, and the changing world of work, human resources and labor relations accelerated by the pandemic, the role of the University of Maine Bureau of Labor Education remains critically important to advancing inclusive opportunity, social mobility and dignity for all Mainers.

I thank you for the opportunity to testify today and for your ongoing support. I look forward to your questions and to partnering with my colleagues at UMaine, USM and across the System to continuing to provide the most relevant learning opportunities to the people of Maine and to implementing this legislation consistent with your intent.