

UMass Amherst Unions Condemn Crackdown on Peaceful Campus Protest

UMass Amherst administration has put the health and safety of the entire university at risk with its over-policing of campus

AMHERST, Mass. – Yesterday evening, May 7, 2024, the University of Massachusetts Amherst Chancellor Javier Reyes invited more than a hundred armed riot police onto campus to violently break up a peaceful encampment of students, staff, and faculty protesting the war in Gaza. Reports and video have emerged of police pushing protestors and kicking them while on the ground, and other forms of unnecessary force. The five largest unions at UMass Amherst, representing thousands of staff, faculty, and graduate workers, condemn the ongoing criminalization of free speech, the over-policing of campus, the infliction of violence upon our students, and the administration's decision to endanger the health and safety of the entire campus rather than negotiate solutions.

Though Chancellor Reyes has claimed, in an email to the UMass campus, that the administration began bargaining in good faith with student leaders of the encampment at 4 p.m. and continued negotiating for more than an hour and a half, eyewitnesses report that a cavalcade of police cars began arriving soon after 5 p.m.— in the middle of what Reyes characterized as “civil discourse to help bridge our differences.”

It did not have to go like this. We are appalled by police crackdowns in response to campus protests—at Columbia, the University of California Los Angeles, the University of Texas Austin, the University of Wisconsin Madison. In this national atmosphere, Reyes's decision to ask the police to break up the protest was tantamount to inviting police violence.

By contrast, UMass could have sided with campuses that chose peaceful resolutions. University administrations at Wesleyan, Northwestern, Brown, Rutgers, the University of Minnesota, and the University of California, Riverside, among others, have negotiated with students and avoided violence.

Chancellor Reyes has claimed that his action was justified by the fact that the protesting students did not obtain a land-use permit—a violation that carries the weight of a civil penalty. But there is no valid justification for using force against students simply because they pitched a few tents on the campus lawn, a crime that carries the same weight as jaywalking.

Unfortunately, the UMass administration's resort to the violent suppression of student protest is part of a larger pattern of disregard for its community that includes understaffing, overwork, low pay, bias in discipline, and the forced privatization of more than 100 state workers—an action decry by everyone from state legislators Jo Comerford and Mindy Domb to Senators Elizabeth Warren and Ed Markey.

We believe that the University of Massachusetts Amherst, the state's flagship university, should be a place of free inquiry, intellectual challenge, and camaraderie, a place that supports free

expression, the right to assembly, and the welfare of students and staff alike. UMass works because we do, and we work because we care for our students—for their intellects as well as their physical safety. Such beliefs cannot flower when the Administration's response to peaceful protest is to call in the riot police.

In Solidarity,

AFSCME Local 1776

Graduate Employee Organization

Massachusetts Society of Professors

Professional Staff Union (UMass Amherst and UMass Boston Chapter Boards)

University Staff Association

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