

MTA applauds UMass unions' efforts to save jobs

Two unions representing thousands of workers at UMass Amherst have successfully negotiated job-saving measures and the formation of joint labor-management committees to study cost-saving proposals other than reductions in the campus workforce.

“This agreement wins an important reprieve for members of the Professional Staff Union and the University Staff Association. Members organized to put pressure on the campus administration, which wanted to shut down bargaining and immediately lay off hundreds of workers. Union members saved health care and preserved financial stability for families throughout the region around UMass Amherst,” said MTA President Merrie Najimy.

Most PSU and USA members will take two weeklong furloughs, and some will take longer furloughs. UMass Amherst cannot, however, lay off members of the two staff unions prior to Jan. 31. In the meantime, members of the unions and management at UMass Amherst will meet to evaluate cost-saving proposals that the PSU and USA have brought to the bargaining table as alternatives to layoffs. And advocacy will continue to secure at least level funding from the state for the rest of the fiscal year. In July, the Legislature passed a level-funded budget for public higher education through the end of October.

The university had threatened last week to lay off as many as 450 workers, prompting the unions to file charges against UMass Amherst with state labor officials, asserting that the Chancellor Kumble Subbaswamy's administration was violating earlier agreements and had stopped negotiating in good faith.

MTA Vice President Max Page, a professor at UMass Amherst, said that while the unions successfully pushed back against the university's effort to get rid of hundreds of workers, the unwarranted threats of mass layoffs remain. Page said the university administration and UMass President Marty Meehan must work harder to secure necessary state and federal funds for the campus rather than continuing to force every campus to impose layoffs and deny workers health insurance.

Page pointed out that the PSU and the USA have identified plenty of work for members of both unions, even as the campus adjusts to temporarily having fewer students on site.

“The UMass system cannot be allowed to use the COVID-19 pandemic as an excuse to usher in corporate-style downsizing,” Page said. “The austerity narrative is a false one, and any efforts to cut workers or programs at UMass will unjustly harm both the people who work there and the countless others who rely on public higher education as the means to achieve the quality of life that they desire and deserve.”