



STATE HOUSE NEWS SERVICE

## **UMass Coalition Urges System to Reinvest in Workers**

*Use Federal Aid to Bring Back Staff, Unions Say*

**Chris Van Buskirk** 5/12/21 4:07 PM

MAY 12, 2021.....Labor unions representing staff, faculty, and other workers within the University of Massachusetts system called on executive leadership Wednesday to utilize federal aid dollars to rehire furloughed workers and end what they say is an understaffing crisis that is negatively impacting students.

The calls come after university officials announced plans for some campuses to return to in-person learning in the fall and as commencements for the nearly 19,000 UMass students graduating this year get underway.

Anneta Argyres, a UMass Boston employee and president of the Professional Staff Union, said UMass President Marty Meehan and Board of Trustees Chair Rob Manning have "overseen a drastic and harmful reduction in staff."

"Cuts to staff had begun prior to the pandemic, then the pandemic was used as an excuse to make even deeper cuts," Argyres said during a Wednesday press conference. "Even now, when the UMass budget clearly shows they have ample funds, all furloughed workers have not been brought back to our campuses."

The UMass system received over \$255 million through three federal relief packages, according to a spokesman for the Massachusetts Teachers Association., who said system's five campuses must spend a minimum of \$114 million student aid and a maximum of \$141 million institutional needs.

And union officials are asking UMass administrators to utilize the \$141 million apportioned for institutional needs to hire back furloughed employees. Argyres congratulated graduating students and said it is an appropriate time to call for an "investment commencement."

"This is an appropriate time to call for an investment commencement, as federal aid allotted to the UMass system for institutional spending since the start of the pandemic has topped \$140 million," Argyres said. "Some of that money must be used to restore the full-time positions that were cut over the past year."

A spokesperson for Meehan did not provide a comment.

The entire University of Massachusetts system [was projected](#) to face a \$335 million budget deficit during fiscal year 2021 as a result of lost revenues from housing and dining services. UMass Amherst Chancellor Kumble Subbaswamy [recently said](#) the Amherst campus faces a \$9 million budget deficit as a result of fiscal 2021 revenue loss.

"We are dealing with a public health crisis and a huge financial challenge. The stakes are very high," Meehan said during a December Board of Trustees committee meeting.

Nick Gula, an electrician at UMass Dartmouth and president of Maintainers Local 6350, advocated for the passage of a change to the state constitution to permit a new tax on households who earn more than \$1 million, which advocates have said would generate \$2 billion a year for education and transportation.

A vote on the income surtax could take place later this summer or early fall, a House lawmaker [said last week](#). The Legislature did not take any action on the proposal Wednesday when they gavelled into a [Constitutional Convention](#) where they quickly recessed until early June.

"The revenue raised from the fair share amendment is dedicated towards transportation and public education," Gula said. "We can hire more people, not push things off to another day, get things done, hire more people, and do what we need to do for the students, for the community."

Donna Vanasse, a clerk at UMass Amherst and treasurer of the University Staff Association, said union membership decreased by nearly 100 members over the course of the pandemic as some employees were offered \$25,000 to voluntarily leave their jobs.

The work of those members, Vanasse said, did not go away and positions have not been refilled which has "substantially increased the workloads of others." She said she spoke with one member who, when recalled to their job, could not keep up with additional duties.

"Previous requests to increase staff had fallen on deaf ears and now due to the increased amount of stress in addition to the excessive workload, that particular member will retire," Vanasse said. "It's shameful that departments haven't used available funding for full staffing and continue to take advantage of those who go above and beyond."

UMass officials on Wednesday estimated that 80 percent of its 19,000 graduates from the five campuses this year are projected to stay in

Massachusetts "to build their lives and careers, fuel the workforce, and transform communities through service."

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05/12/2021

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