



UNITED FARM WORKERS

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United Farm Workers Condemns Police Intimidation and Union-Busting in Grand Rapids, Michigan *Week after marching in César Chávez's name, Mayor Bliss called out by union he formed*

The United Farm Workers (UFW) on Friday condemned Grand Rapids Mayor Rosalynn Bliss for using city police to intimidate student activists and supporting union-busting by the city's transit agency, The Rapid, which Bliss helps lead as a Board Member. Our open letter to the Mayor follows:

“On behalf of the more than 10,000 members of United Farm Workers, I am writing to express our deep disappointment in the breathtaking hypocrisy demonstrated by your administration this past week. On Thursday, March 17, you marched under our banner to commemorate the work of an American icon and our founder, César Chávez. The very next day, on Friday, March 18, you dispatched Grand Rapids police to the homes of student activists to intimidate them for organizing a January sit-in to support transit workers represented by Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 836.

You cannot march in the name of César Chávez one day and use police officers to suppress all that he fought for the next. The United Farm Workers stands in solidarity with our ATU brothers and sisters struggling to preserve their retirement security and the United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) activists who, in an inspiring act of selflessness, have embraced their elders' fight as their own.

I also write to call you to a higher purpose than implementing an austerity agenda that may win accolades from the comfortable but will destroy the lives of the constituents who are counting on you most. We ask that you adopt the spirit of the heroes—César Chávez, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr.—whose names adorn your city's streets and parks by rejecting the tactics of those who opposed and oppressed them in their lifetimes.

Union-busting and police intimidation of workers and activists has a dark history in our country, one that has been especially painful for farm workers. When our leadership organized roving pickets in the fields, growers and police would harass and even use violence against picketers. This vile abuse of power did not succeed in breaking our spirits but instead galvanized support for our cause around the world. It will do the same for bus drivers in Grand Rapids.

We hope you will join us in standing with the working people of Grand Rapids and supporting their struggle for better wages, a dignified retirement, and First Amendment rights to free speech, association, and assembly.

Sincerely,

Arturo S. Rodriguez
President, United Farm Workers

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Founded by Cesar E. Chavez (1927-1993)



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We Stand with Workers in Grand Rapids, Because We Stand for Free Speech

The Bill of Rights Defense Committee/Defending Dissent Foundation strongly condemns the ongoing campaign of intimidation against transit workers and students in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The struggle for workers rights has always been closely aligned with the struggle for free speech. We honor the commitment of these students and workers to speak truth to power, and deplore the tactics employed by the City and the transit agency to silence them.

The City and its transit authority, the Rapid, have engaged in a long running series of attempts to suppress the free speech rights of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 836 members who oppose cuts to their pensions, an egregiously high fare hike of 16% on riders, and a \$4,000 raise for the agency's CEO. The Rapid, on whose board sits Grand Rapids Mayor Rosalynn Bliss, has threatened to have off-duty workers ***arrested for handing out leaflets on public property and for protesting on public streets.*** The latest move takes aim at student supporters of the workers, after a federal court issued a consent order barring the city from interfering with the leafleting and protesting by union members.

In January, Grand Valley State United Students Against Sweatshops staged a day of actions in support of the ATU workers. These actions included both a fare strike and a sit-in. The sit-in took place at a public meeting of the transit authority and was made up of mostly students and community supporters. Students report that the plan was to stage the sit-in when the transit authority moved from public session to executive session and leave when asked to do so by the police. Although police were present, at no point did they ask the protesters to leave and the protesters ultimately left of their own accord.

On Friday March 18--nearly ***two months later***--police showed up at the doors of the students and a worker who participated in the sit-in, asking them questions about fellow activists, and telling them they might at ***some point in the future be arrested over the sit-in.*** The baffling and quite frankly absurd nature of this train of events indicates that the police have very little interest in actual law enforcement and are merely attempting to intimidate students and workers from participating in protest actions. In a free society, law enforcement is not used to silence dissent. Such actions are intolerable.

We know that the struggle for workers' rights has always been closely connected with the struggle for the right to freedom of speech. The very right to form a union is protected

under the right to freedom of association. Strikes and picket lines are amongst the most quintessential examples of expressive action our Bill of Rights is meant to protect. Yet, for far too long federal, state, and local governments would go to great lengths to suppress these rights. Judges declared unions illegal and jailed workers. Police, national guardsmen, and private mercenary forces, like the infamous Pinkerton Detectives, attacked picket lines with great violence. Assemblies and presses were banned; ideas were criminalized. Yet, the workers' movement refused to give up, refused to concede that the Bill of Rights were merely a promise the government had no intention of delivering on.

In 1939, the Supreme Court recognized for the first time (in *Hague v Committee for Industrial Organization*) a right to political assemblies on public streets and parks when striking down a law meant to ban labor meetings. This is emblematic of how everyone who enjoys free expression in the United States owes a tremendous debt to the labor movement. We must also remember that while these rights were eventually ratified by the courts, during a shameful period in our past, when it came to the rights of working people, politicians and courts were more than willing to side with powerful corporate interests over our Bill of Rights. As a result, these rights had to be won on the picket line, in the mine encampment, on the factory floor. Thanks to this struggle all Americans, whether they participate in the labor movement or not, enjoy a range of rights. This is why one cannot support freedom of speech without standing in solidarity with the labor movement.

ATU and its student supporters are seeking to use the free speech rights won by past labor movements and enjoyed today by all Americans. Yet, these rights are being attacked by those who do not wish to hear from workers. Once again, workers are fighting to protect the very fundamentals of free speech. Because we are an organization that stands for free speech, we stand with the workers and their student allies in Grand Rapids.

The Bill of Rights Defense Committee/Defending Dissent Foundation defends the rights and liberties guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution by converting concern and outrage into powerful political action. BORDC/DDF strengthens participatory democracy by exercising our right to political dissent and helps build a society in which everyone is able to fully exercise their constitutional rights