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ABSTRACT

Founded by Charles Bagli in 1976, the Revolutionary Student Brigade at UMass Amherst (later the Radical Student Union) has been a focal point for organization by politically radical students. RSU members have responded to issues of social justice, addressing both local, regional, and national concerns ranging from militarism to the environment, racism and sexism to globalization.

The RSU records document the history of a particularly long-lived organization of left-leaning student activists at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Beginning in the mid-1970s, as students were searching for ways to build upon the legacy of the previous decade, the RSU has been a constant presence on campus, weathering the Reagan years, tough budgetary times, and dramatic changes in the political culture at the national and state levels. The RSU reached its peak during the 1980s with protests against American involvement in Central America, CIA recruitment on campus, American support for the Apartheid regime in South Africa, and government-funded weapons research, but in later years, the organization has continued to adapt, organizing against globalization, sweatshops, the Iraq War, and a host of other issues.

RADICAL STUDENT UNION (RSU) RECORDS

1905-2006 (*Bulk:* 1978-2005)

22 BOXES (14.5 LINEAR FT.)

CALL NO.: RG45/80 R1

BACKGROUND ON RADICAL STUDENT UNION (RSU)

The Radical Student Union (RSU) first appeared at UMass Amherst in 1976 as the Revolutionary Student Brigade (RSB). Founded by Charles Bagli, a Boston University graduate who had moved to Amherst to capitalize on the political momentum on campus, the RSB emerged out of a 1969 schism within the Students for a Democratic Society that produced The Revolutionary Youth Movement 1 (later to become the Weather Underground) and The Revolutionary Youth Movement 2. This latter organization, comprised of Communists and Socialists of various ideological persuasions, quickly divided and regrouped, leading to the creation of several groups including the Revolutionary Union in 1971, which set up a youth wing in 1972 called the Attica Brigade, which itself split off and formed its own organization in 1975, the Revolutionary Student Brigade.

The UMass Amherst Chapter of the RSB began slowly, with Bagli and other activists distributing material in the Campus Center during the 1975-76 school year. By the spring of 1976, the organization achieved official recognition as a student organization, with the mission of promoting the struggles and consciousness of students through the concrete application of Marxism-Leninism-Mao-Tsetung thought. Taking an office on the second floor of the Student Union building, they began to receive funding from the Student Government Association and a developed a core group of students.

The next thirty years of RSU history can be divided roughly into three phases: the founding and early development of the organization; the robust years of the mid- to late-1980s; and the slow waning of the organization since. Across this time, several principles of the group have remained constant. First, the RSU has always intended to be a multi-issue group whose focus is determined by its membership. Second, the RSU is committed to working with other groups on campus and in the community. Third, the RSU has consistently examined the actions of UMass in a global context, trying to ensure that the University acts in a socially responsible way. Fourth, no member has to subscribe to any particular ideology to be involved. These principles, however, have typically been coupled with other, seemingly contradictory factors. From the beginning, the RSU membership has been drawn primarily from white and middle to upper class students, while few of the people of color who have joined the group stayed active for long. The group has faced similar difficulties in developing women in leadership roles, even though the membership has been roughly balanced between men and women.

By 1980, the RSB had achieved a degree of stability on campus and a relatively high visibility.

ACCESS

The collection is open for research.

LANGUAGE:

English

Special Collections & University Archives

UMass Amherst Libraries
154 Hicks Way
Amherst, Mass. 01003-9275

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W: scua.library.umass.edu

D: Credo

E: scua@library.umass.edu

When the Revolutionary Student Brigade officially joined the Revolutionary Communist Party (changing its name to the Revolutionary Communist Youth Brigade), the UMass chapter was one of several that struck off on its own, adopting the name Radical Student Union. Despite this break with the national leadership, the RSU maintained some aspects of the earlier party-based organization, continuing to distribute revolutionary readings at meetings for future discussion, and having a secret collective into which only some members of the broader group were invited and which only a few even knew about. On its own, the RSU gradually evolved into a less doctrinaire organization, shedding the secret collective and affiliating with a variety of organizations. From 1981-1987, for example, the RSU joined the Progressive Student Network, a loosely linked coalition of campus-based student groups that sought to share resources and ideas and lend assistance when needed. They have subsequently worked with groups ranging from the American Friends Service Committee to the Students Coalition Against Nukes Nation Wide, United Students Against Sweatshops, Palestinian Action Coalition, the Five College Peace Network, and People for a Socially Responsible University.

On campus, the RSB and RSU worked on a long succession of issues. Among its mobilizations, the RSB organized protests around the 1978 death of Seta Rampersand, a black UMass student who was murdered in South Deerfield and whose death was never properly investigated. They were also active in protesting the decision at Kent State University to build a gymnasium on the site where four Kent State students were gunned down by National Guardsmen during an anti-war protest in 1970, organizing buses to take protestors to Kent State.

Among the most consistent threads in RSU activism has been a steadfast opposition to militarism and imperialism. Opposition to reinstatement of the military draft became a focus of concern after the return of Selective Service registration in the mid-1970s, and organizing around the issue of draft reinstatement has returned repeatedly, most recently in 2005, when a shortage of volunteers and wars on two fronts made it seem as if a new draft was imminent. Similarly, the RSU was deeply concerned with the realities of nuclear proliferation during the Reagan years. The Three Mile Island incident in 1979 highlighted the problems of nuclear power and the bellicosity of the Reagan administration led the RSB to join with national and local groups and organize around these issues through at least the early 1990s.

During the Reagan years, the RSU was active in opposition to American "imperial" expansion, and particularly to intervention in Central America, support for the Apartheid regime in South Africa, and the militarization of research on campus. In a series of demonstrations and marches, both locally and in Washington, D.C., RSU members protested the government's funding and training of death squads in Central America, the efforts of the Central Intelligence Agency to recruit on campus, and the use of Department of Defense funds in weapons research on campus. These protests came to a head with two major waves of sit-ins. In 1987, a group of students and community members occupied Memorial Hall, leading to sixty arrests, including Abbie Hoffman and former president Carters daughter, Amy. All were eventually acquitted. Two years later, students sat in at some of the labs in the Graduate Research Center where Defense Department research was taking place, and then moved to Memorial Hall, the chancellors office, and back to the Graduate Research Center. Organizing against

apartheid, the RSU lobbied for UMass to divest from corporations based in and operating in South Africa. The April 1st Coalition took over the office of the Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs for four days and three nights ending the sit-in only when the university agreed to form a commission to study divestment. Off campus, RSU members have periodically sought to form coalitions with organized labor. In their first labor solidarity campaign in 1980, the RSU joined in support of a strike by nursing home workers at the Amherst Nursing Home.

After the high level of activity in the 1980s, the RSU has experienced a considerable drop off. Members joined in demonstrations against the Persian Gulf War in August 1990, including the protests at Westover Air Force Base, and they worked in solidarity to help win University recognition of the Graduate Employee Organization (GEO), and to convince UMass in 2000 to sign onto the Workers Rights Consortium, opposing the sale of sweatshop-produced apparel in the University Store. Efforts in the early 2000s to revive the organization met with mixed success, with some sustained protests against state budget cuts to education (the Save UMass campaign), against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and on issues surrounding globalization. Members took part in protests against the Free Trade Area of the Americas in Québec in 2001 and Miami 2003, the latter notorious for violence. Following a campaign against labor and environmental abuses by the Coca Cola Corporation, the RSU almost disappeared, but was kept alive by several students until the fall of 2006.

The Revolutionary Student Brigade/Radical Student Union has managed to do something that few left-wing groups have: it has survived in more or less the same form it started with the same key principles and in the same physical space. Campus-based groups face difficulty in maintaining continuity as they lose members to graduation or the press of other concerns. The Radical Student Union remained active as of the 2006-2007 academic year, organizing several Critical Mass bike rides, protesting the honorary degree presented to Andrew Card, a senior official in the Bush White House, and attending the protests at the Bio International Convention.

CONTENTS OF COLLECTION

The records of the Radical Student Union and its predecessor, The Radical Student Brigade, document the history of a particularly long-lived organization of left-leaning student activists at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Beginning in the mid-1970s, as students were searching for ways to build upon the legacy of the previous decade, the RSU has been a constant presence on campus, weathering the Reagan years, tough budgetary times, and dramatic changes in the political culture at the national and state levels. The RSU reached its peak during the 1980s with protests against American involvement in Central America, CIA recruitment on campus, American support for the Apartheid regime in South Africa, and government-funded weapons research, but in later years, the organization has continued to adapt, organizing against globalization, sweatshops, the Iraq War, and a host of other issues.

In addition to the administrative and financial records of the RSU, the collection includes an extensive set of topical files that reflect the evolving interests of the organization and its ties to other, related organizations in the region. Also noteworthy are a handful of banners, some quite large, displayed

by RSU members during demonstrations.

Series descriptions

SERIES 1: ADMINISTRATIVE AND FINANCIAL

1976-2005

2 LINEAR FEET

Series 1 contains two sub-series. First, the administrative sub-series contains internal records kept by the RSU to document its activities, including leaflets advertising RSU meetings from 1980 through 2001, a student booklet created in 2004 entitled "A History analysis and How To," documents pertaining to the status of the RSU within the University, contact sheets and directories for members and the press, meeting notes and agendas, and documents relating to procedures and lists of office duties. The sub-series also contains a few newspaper clippings about the RSU, articles written by members for publication, catalogues for materials and speakers, song sheets, stationary prototypes, and folders used in the original filing process that are of interest.

The RSU's financial records consist primarily of reports submitted to the Student Government Association to account for expenditures, and materials used in grant writing. Both sub-series are filed alphabetically for folder title.

SERIES 2: SUBJECT FILES

1966-2005

5.5 LINEAR FEET

The members of the RSU maintained an extensive topical file in their office in the Campus Center. These files were used in several ways by members: as resources for teaching and learning about specific issues (e.g., South Africa), for designing flyers, or for developing learning skills; as documentation of events planned by the RSU or in which they took part; and as information about organizations with whom the RSU coordinated efforts (e.g., American Friends Service Committee). Occasionally, the RSU brought together materials from disparate sources relating to topics of particular interest. Under Womens Issues, for example, they filed materials on Abortion, Leadership, Pornography, and Violence against Women. In most cases, however, the topics are less systematically treated, and it may be necessary to delve deeply to locate all relevant information. A few items dating from prior to the founding of the RSB probably came either from Charles Bagli, the founder of RSU, from other early members, or were inherited from earlier groups on campus. Some materials appear to have come from the Revolutionary Communist Youth Brigade and the Communist Youth Brigade, both of which were active on campus at the same time.

The series includes newspaper clippings, flyers, published materials, song sheets, correspondence, and notes. Photographs have been removed to the Audio Visual Series and banners have been removed to the Textiles Series.

SERIES 3: RADICAL STUDENT UNION PUBLICATIONS

1981-2000

0.5 LINEAR FEET

This small series contains materials published by the RSU or its members on the University of Massachusetts Amherst campus. The five publications are essentially irregularly-issued periodicals (some with missing issues), with the longest running publication, *Critical Times*, housed separately. All of these publications focus on social justice issues.

SERIES 4: REVOLUTIONARY STUDENT BRIGADE (RSB) TERM PAPER LIBRARY

1971-1985 0.5 LINEAR FEET

The Revolutionary Student Brigade/Radical Student Union kept a term paper library for use by its members in preparing for work in school and in their activism. The papers, some of which pre-date the founding of RSB, are organized by general subject area.

SERIES 5: PRINTED MATERIALS

1905-1982 1.5 LINEAR FEET

The Printed Materials series contains 156 booklets, books, and single printed sheets covering a wide range of topics, particularly Communism, the Middle East conflict, and Labor. Of particular interest are the materials regarding the protests against the busing of school children in Boston, and a booklet from 1978 about the 1974 death of Karen Silkwood. A few additional monographs are included in Series 2: Subject Files.

SERIES 6: TEXTILES

1985-2006 4.5 LINEAR FEET

The Textiles consist of sixteen banners and armbands displayed by the RSU during their actions relating to apartheid, labor issues, globalization, and opposition to war and imperialism. The majority of the banners are not dated, and three have yet to be identified as to subject. Almost all are made out of cotton with paint or marker used to create an image, and they vary in size from the size of an armband to approximately ten feet square.

 **Collection inventory**

SERIES 1: ADMINISTRATIVE AND FINANCIAL

1976-2005 2 LINEAR FEET

ADMINISTRATIVE

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Catalogues: Speak Out!	1995-1997	Box 1: 7
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SERIES 2: SUBJECT FILES

1966-2005

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Afghanistan	1978-undated	Box 5: 6
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CIA: Civil Disobedience	1987	Box 6: 6
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CIA: Group Correspondence	undated	Box 6: 10
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Student Activities Trust Fund See also: Administration series	1983	Box 15: 10
Student Government Association See also: Administrative series	1983-1984	Box 15: 11
Student Organizing Project	1975-1983	Box 15: 12
Student Parents	Undated	Box 15: 13
Student Senate	1979-1984	Box 15: 14
Sweatshops 1	1996-1997	Box 15: 15
Sweatshops 2	1997-1999	Box 15: 16
Sweden	1980	Box 15: 17
Take Back Democracy	2004	Box 16: 1
Universal Rights	1988	Box 16: 2
U.S. Student Association	1990	Box 16: 3
University Regulations and Policies See also: Administration series	1984	Box 16: 4
Vietnam	1965-1979	Box 16: 5
Welfare Reform 1 Some of this material may be from ca. 1994	1997	Box 16: 6
Welfare Reform 2	1997-1999	Box 16: 7
Womens Issues: Abortion 1	1986	Box 16: 8
Womens Issues: Abortion 2	1981-1999	Box 16: 9
Womens Issues: Abortion 3 Conference Packet From Abortion Rights to Social Justice	2001	Box 16: 10
Womens Issues: Leadership	Undated	Box 16: 11
Womens Issues: Pornography	1980-1985	Box 16: 12
Womens Issues: Reproductive Freedom	1978	Box 16: 13
Womens Issues: Violence Against, Sexual Harassment, Sexism See also: Seta Rampersand	1979-1990	Box 16: 14
Womens Studies	1981	Box 16: 15
World Bank and International Monetary Fund	2000-2001	Box 16: 16
World Economic Forum	2002	Box 16: 17
World Trade Organization	2003	Box 16: 18

SERIES 3: RADICAL STUDENT UNION PUBLICATIONS

Information and Opinions About	1999-2000	Box 17: 1
Liberator	1994	Box 17: 2
The Progressive Student	1983	Box 17: 3
The Weekly News	1989-1990	Box 17: 4
Welcome to UMass (Disinformation)	1981-1984	Box 17: 5

SERIES 4: REVOLUTIONARY STUDENT BRIGADE (RSB) TERM**1971-1985****PAPER LIBRARY**

Table of Contents	1979	Box 17: 1
Anarchism	1985	Box 17: 2
Anthropology	1976	Box 17: 3
Greek Society	Undated	Box 17: 4
History	1972-1978	Box 17: 5
Latin American Studies	1985	Box 17: 6
Law	1981	Box 17: 7
Literature	1972-1978	Box 17: 8
Marxism	1972-1981	Box 17: 9
Miscellaneous 1	1969-1978	Box 17: 10
Miscellaneous 2	1977-1982	Box 17: 11
Political Science	1978-1981	Box 17: 12
Socialism	1976-1978	Box 17: 13
Student Movement	1971-1973	Box 17: 14

SERIES 5: PRINTED MATERIAL**1905-1982**

Apartheid	1978	1 items, Booklet	Box 19
Boston Bussing	1974-1975	8 items, Booklets	Box 19
Class	1971-1974	4 items, Booklets	Box 19
COINTELPRO The Public Eye vol. 1, no. 2	1978	1 items, Booklet	Box 19
Communism	1939-1982	20 items, Booklets and books	Box 19
Cooperatives	Undated	1 items, Booklet	Box 19
Economics	Undated	3 items, Booklets and book	Box 19
Family	Undated	1 items, Booklet	Box 19
Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender/sexual, queer and questioning	1971-1976	6 items, Booklets	Box 19
Housing	1969-1977	4 items, Booklets	Box 19
Imperialism	1977	1 items, Booklet	Box 19
Israel/Palestine	1966-1973	25 items, Booklets and book	Box 19
Labor	1905-1977	25 items, Booklets	Box 19
Movement Building	1973-1979	14 items, Booklets and book	Box 19
Non violence	1966-1969	5 items, Booklets, single sheets	Box 19
Anti Nuclear About Karen Silkwood	1978	1 items, Booklet	Box 19
Peace	1963-1971	6 items, Booklets and book	Box 19
Racism	1957-1977	13 items, Booklets	Box 19

Socialism	1972-1975	4 items, Booklets	Box 19
Spanish	1970	1 items, Booklet	Box 19
Welfare	1975	8 items, Booklets, single sheets	Box 19
Women's Issues	1975	4 items, Booklets	Box 19

SERIES 6: TEXTILES

1985-2006

Apartheid: Citicorp pays for apartheid, apartheid kills. Image: "blood" under the word kill	Undated	Red and blue paint, black and red marker on white cloth.	Box 20
Central America: In Memorial for all those whose have died. Image: non Potentially related to the war in Central America.	ca.1985	Black marker on white cloth	Box 20
Central America: Let's stop waging war on El Salvador. Image: small peace sig	ca.1985	Black and red paint on white	Box 20
CIA: "CIA is Murder Inc, USA". Image: skull and cross bones	ca.1987	Black and red paint on white cloth	Box 20
CIA: On to Washington! March & rally, April 25, Action at Langley April 27. Image: cars full of multi-ethnic people holding signs (Peace) (No CIA	1987	Red and black text multi-colored image on blue tie-dyed? cloth	Box 20
Gay rights: Homophobia is a social disease. Love not hate. Gayzes OK. Image: non	Undated	Black and gold paint on pink cloth.	Box 21
Globalization: It's a Dirty Business * and no one's gotta do it. No more \$ 4 war, Plan Columbia, WEF, FTAA, World Bank, IMF, Domination, War, Violence . Image: twin towers	ca. 2001	Paint on patterned cloth	Box 20
Globalization: UMass supports human rights abuses. End the Contract with Coca Cola. Image:	spring 2004 (never used)	Red and black paint on white cloth	Box 20
Labor: Strike before strangulation. Image: red fis Undergraduate banner from the Graduate Employee Organization (GEO) strike.	ca. 1991	Black and red paint on white sheet	Box 21
Peace: Food not bombs. Image: non From Tent State University?	ca.2006	Black paint on white cloth, strings attached	Box 22
Peace: One love peace, earth (image) > \$, people (image) > \$. Image: a yellow heart between "one and "love", stencil of a United States flag with a peace sign instead of stars, image of earth and people.	Undated	Black, red, green, and yellow paint, colored marker on patterned cloth	Box 22
Peace: Peace. Image: Non	Undated	Black ink on green fabri	Box 22
Peace: Think military or think for yourself. Image:	Undated	Red paint on white cloth	Box 22
Peace: Town & gown stop the military death machine. Image:	ca. 1990	Red and purple marker on white cloth	Box 22
Peace: UMass students say: Stop the arms race (with signatures). Image: various symbols	ca. 1983	Red and black paint, colored markers on white cloth	Box 22
Unidentified AT&T. Image: skull		Blue and black paint	Box 22
Unidentified: Aetna		Blue paint on white cloth	Box 22
Unidentified: Tampax . Image:	Undated	Blue paint on white cloth	Box 22

✿ Administrative information

PROVENANCE

Gift of the RSU and Emma Lang, 2006 and before.

PROCESSING INFORMATION

Processed by Emma Lang, 2006-2007.

RELATED MATERIAL

See also the International Oil Working Group Records (MS 268) and Records American Friends Service Committee Western Massachusetts (MS).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Viscio, Randy Louis, *Under the Bridge: Notes from a Me Generation Dropout*. Cowpasture Productions: Lawrence, Mass., 1993

Turner, Terisa and Timothy Belknap, *Takeover! Students U.S.A. Mobilize for the '90's: Documents from the Movement*. International Oil Working Group: Amherst, 1989

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Cite as: Radical Student Union Records (RG45/80 R1). Special Collections and University Archives, W.E.B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Search terms

Subjects

- Anti-apartheid movements--Massachusetts.
- Central America--Foreign relations--United States.
- College students--Political activity.
- Communism.
- El Salvador--History--1979-1992.
- Guatemala--History--1945-1982.
- Iraq War, 2003- .
- Nicaragua--History--1979-1990.
- Peace movements--Massachusetts.
- Persian Gulf War, 1991.
- Racism.
- Socialism.
- Student movements.
- United States--Foreign relations--Central America.

Names

- Progressive Student Network.
- Radical Student Union (RSU).
- Revolutionary Student Brigade.
- United States. Central Intelligence Agency
- University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Genre terms

- Banners.