I’m Tom Goodkind. I’ve been the research machinist for the science departments at UMass Boston since 1985, and I’m the president of the Professional Staff Union. Among the 1800 professional staff at Amherst and Boston are admissions counselors, advisors, academic support professionals, mental health counselors, nurses, residence directors, fund-raisers, IT experts and many other front-line staff without whom the University would grind to a halt.

I’ve been around long enough to have come before you a few times, but I try to do so only when it’s urgent. I understand the desire to roll your eyes and let the rhetoric blow by, but I urge you to pay attention. Today eight unions representing faculty, classified staff, professional staff and graduate employees are delivering petitions with over 2,500 signatures. You are our employer, we are your employees, a bond is breaking, and we are sounding an alarm.

President Caret recently characterized our increase in funding as a “transformational moment” for the University. Yet as our members lobbied and worked for those increased funds, none of us dreamed this would become a transformational moment for labor relations as well. It never occurred to us that as state funding was finally reversing course, as our campuses were surging with enrollments and energy, and as the efforts and workloads of a shorthanded staff were surging accordingly, the University would choose this very moment to launch an unprecedented attack on our benefits and working conditions.
Even more surprising have been the justifications for this offensive. We are told repeatedly that we do not deserve these long-held benefits, because non-union employees do not enjoy them. We are told that it is desirable to “standardize” benefits, but to standardize down rather than up.

I suspect that many of you have applauded speakers such as Senator Warren and Governor Patrick when they have decried the national race to the bottom, called for shoring up working class income and benefits, and even cited the crucial role of unions in reversing the rising tide of inequality. But now this race to the bottom is being run in your own house, in your own family, and we can only wonder at how you treat your family members—those dedicated staff who have already given so much to UMass. And we wonder how you will recruit and retain competent and dedicated staff in the future.

The race to the bottom is no different here at UMass than elsewhere in the country: it leads not to enthusiasm and innovation but to demoralization and decay. And so long as you, our employer, insist on reducing our benefits and devaluing our worth, there can be no common cause in seeking funding and no common cause in celebrating anniversaries or transformational moments. There can only be conflict. The choice is yours.