



Miami Herald, The (FL)
2006-04-27
Section: Metro & State
Edition: Final
Page: 4B

LAWYERS LEND HAND TO STUDENT PROTESTERS

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Student protesters at the University of Miami have attracted a group of prominent Miami lawyers who are volunteering their time to help students facing disciplinary action for their roles in a campus labor struggle. Lawyers say 16 students are under investigation for "major charges" that could result in expulsion or loss of scholarships if the school decides to charge them.

Graduate student Katharine Westaway, one of those summoned to the dean of students office, said she believes the potential charges stem from the students' participation in a sit-in last week in the administration building.

UM spokeswoman Margot Winick said federal student privacy laws prevent university officials from commenting on potential discipline.

NEUTRAL POSITION

UM President Donna Shalala has said the school is neutral in a dispute between the Service Employees International Union and Boston-based contractor UNICCO over an effort to unionize school janitors. But she has expressed increasing frustration at the lingering protest that has involved workers, students, professors and clergy.

On Tuesday, UM won a court injunction to keep union organizers off campus.

"During this final week of classes and final exams, we will not tolerate interruptions to campus life," Shalala wrote in an e-mail sent out Wednesday to students and staff.

STUDYING THE RULES

Defense attorney David O. Markus, who normally pores over complex federal law to defend high-paying clients, spent the day studying UM's student handbook before a meeting with UM associate dean of students Gregory R. Singleton on behalf of freshman Alyssa Cundari, 19.

“No charges have been filed yet. They're still investigating, they say,” Markus said.

He and other lawyers say the hearings have been going on all week and that defense lawyers have advised students not to answer questions.

“I was actually shocked today when they were attempting to get [student leader] Jacob [Coker-Dukowitz] to essentially confess to them,” said **Susan Bozorgi**, a private defense attorney who is organizing fellow lawyers.

GROUP GROWS

Bozorgi has assembled nearly 20 lawyers, including former American Civil Liberties Union Presidents Lida Rodriguez-Taseff and Benjamin Waxman, and Patricia Ireland, former president of the National Organization for Women.

Bozorgi said the lawyers are not taking sides in the labor dispute, but worry UM is becoming too aggressive in thwarting nonviolent protests.

“I don't have an opinion about the underlying issue,” she said. “I'm offended that the school is attempting to use rules and regulations in a private institution to punish and squash the First Amendment rights of a group of students. That's what's moving me.”