Communists gather at UMass

Republican Club challenges national convention of leftists

By Alexander Reid
Globe Staff

AMHERST – On a day that might have been spent savoring the summer recess, the campus of the University of Massachusetts erupted into a confrontation between political philosophies.

On one side yesterday were were the conservative members of the Republican Club, whose members roared pro-Reagan, pro-American slogans to students inside the university's campus center.

Said their leader, Michael Ross, 27, a UMass-Amherst graduate, "If the Communists don't like the way America is today, that's tough. They can pack up and leave. We don't want or need their opinions on anything." The group of 12 to 15 students stayed outside the campus center all day.

Inside were members of the Young Communist League of the United States, who came to UMass-Amherst for the league's third national convention.

"This is an important time in the political and social life of this country and the Communists will have a say," said Joseph Sims, 31, a member of the group's executive board who lives in New York City. "Ronald Reagan, George Bush and the whole Reagan revolution is dying on its deathbed. We, the youth movement, are here to have an influence and to watch Reaganism die."

More than 300 delegates from across the country were expected to attend the three days of events here. Representatives from student groups in several other countries were also expected.

Workshops, speeches and seminars will focus on apartheid in South Africa, CIA recruitment on college campuses, and racism at universities, among other topics.

John Bachtell, national chairman of the group, said this year's convention will have a special accent on student activism.

"The youth of this country are getting angry, more frustrated and more impatient for change," he said. "There is no way a member of the young generation will have it as good as our parents as long as capitalism exists. We have lived through eight years of Reaganism and are ready to increase our activism. The climate is similar to what motivated the student movements in the '60s."

Yesterday's audience was equally split between white and black. Few were older than 30. Most seemed eager to discuss aspects of Marxist dogma or denounce what 23-year-old Marc Almaraz, of Arizona State University, called "repression of free political dialogue under Reaganism." He said dozens of people at the convention refused to be photographed or give their names for fear of reprisal.

"It's crazy but some people here do have fears," he said. "We are just youths who are fighting for our future. Fighting for jobs, decent wages and education for all. How will that harm society?"

It is not hard to figure why the league chose UMass-Amherst for this convention.

Activism on campus

In 1986, activist Abbie Hoffman and Amy Carter, daughter of former President Jimmy Carter, were arrested during demonstrations against CIA recruitment drives. In February, a group of minority students staged a six-day building takeover to protest racial violence on campus. Moreover, Jason Rabinowitz, a 20-year-old senior from the Bronx, was elected co-president of the student government. Rabinowitz' election, which was contested by aconservative student group, was validated by a student government committee last week, according to a university spokeswoman.

"You look at what's happened on this campus in the last two or three years and you realize that there is a big surge in student activism," said Rabinowitz. "This convention will bring all that energy together and give it more inspiration."

Officers of the league said the organization is five years old with nearly 50 chapters. Membership is loose, requiring only a $1 initiation fee followed by monthly dues of $1. The group, which has no formal relationship with the American Communist Party, holds conventions every two years. The previous two were held in Cleveland and New York City.

Members of the Republican Club approached the entrance to the auditorium carrying placards and an American flag while chanting "Commies out of America." Ross, who said he is originally from Swampscott, said he was as upset with the UMass administration as he was with the Communists.

"The Massachusetts taxpayers have a right to know that their tax dollars are subsidizing communism. Those Communists should be outlawed. They should never be allowed to come in here. The administration lets them get away with murder."

But according to Joan Ashwell, spokeswoman for the school, the league, like any other campus organization, has a right to use university facilities without charge. The group, she said, was represented on campus by the Organization for Marxist Studies.