

TEMPEST

From student revolt to workers' power

... as UC academic workers are poised to strike

by **Helen Scott**

*As California academic workers prepare to strike against repression of pro-Palestine activism, **Helen Scott** discusses the connection between student struggle and workers' action.*

This week, academic student employees, postdocs, and academic researchers in the University of California system voted overwhelmingly to authorize strikes to protest UC's complicity in right-wing and police violence against pro-Palestinian encampments, **particularly at UCLA** (<https://tempestmag.org/2024/05/defend-the-encampments/>). Leadership of their union, UAW 4811, will meet today to consider calling "stand up" (rolling) strikes on various campuses—although some union activists have been getting ready to strike even without a go-ahead from top union leaders. Meanwhile, one militant caucus **is pressing** (https://www.instagram.com/p/C6xQ_2xpLz-/?igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA%3D%3D&img_index=1) to expand the demands of divestment from Israel and to add a demand to abolish campus cops.

Scott made her presentation in Burlington, VT, on May 9, a week after the assaults on the UCLA encampment but before the strike vote.

I want to begin by sharing some stories from the press this last week. The first is from the May 4 issue of the *New York Times* and has the [stunning headline](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/04/us/college-protests-free-speech.html) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/04/us/college-protests-free-speech.html>), “From free speech to free Palestine: Six decades of student protest”:

The protests against Israel's war in Gaza that have erupted on college campuses around the United States are merely the latest in a tradition of student-led, left-leaning activism dating back at least to the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War protests of the 1960s.

The second is from a [May 5 piece](https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/may/05/uk-student-campus-pro-palestine-protests) (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/may/05/uk-student-campus-pro-palestine-protests>) in the *British Guardian*, called “There are people in tents writing dissertations”:

Hala Hanina, a Palestinian who has been involved in protests at the University of Newcastle, said more than 400 people she knows in [Gaza](https://www.theguardian.com/world/gaza) (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/gaza>) have been killed. Hanina, 31, who came to the UK before October, said: “I don't have friends now. They have all either been killed or lost their families ... I'm doing this for all of Gaza that's facing a genocide, something that's unprecedented and unimaginable.

“I must do whatever is possible to be done and even impossible, we'll make it possible ... It's so important for the student community and British community that they are fighting for justice.”

And [the last](https://www.wsj.com/us-news/college-protests-faculty-free-speech-7c1542da?mod=hp_lead_pos1) (https://www.wsj.com/us-news/college-protests-faculty-free-speech-7c1542da?mod=hp_lead_pos1) is from the *Wall Street Journal* of May 4 2024:

Faculty, many of whom are in their 60s and 70s and came of age during the era of Vietnam War protests, are pushing back against university presidents, accusing the leaders of heavy-handed and inconsistent [crackdowns on free speech](https://www.wsj.com/us-news/education/the-politics-of-campus-free-speech-draw-scrutiny-70a18ebe?mod=article_inline) ([https://www.wsj.com/us-news/education/the-politics-of-campus-free-speech-draw-scrutiny-70a18ebe?mod=article inline](https://www.wsj.com/us-news/education/the-politics-of-campus-free-speech-draw-scrutiny-70a18ebe?mod=article_inline)), and warning against a wave of authoritarianism some say has been creeping onto campuses for years. Professors in leadership positions are guiding calls for votes of no-confidence, spearheading classroom walkouts and visiting encampments alongside students. Many are facing punishment from police and their employers.

These three stories reflect the central dynamics of this stage of the Palestine solidarity movement: students' deep emotional pain, anger, and moral outrage in response to Israel's continuing genocide and ethnic cleansing; the mass shift by students to civil disobedience; the brutal crackdown from university and city authorities which has only led to renewed struggle, including extraordinary solidarity from faculty; and the spread of university protests across the nation and the globe. New School faculty, for example, set up their own encampment named for the Palestinian teacher and poet Refaat Alareer, who was murdered by Israel earlier this year—and whose eldest daughter and new grandchild were murdered by Israel last month.



Demonstrators at George Washington University, May 2. Image by [Diane Krauthamer](https://www.flickr.com/photos/diane_krauthamer/53704338195/) (https://www.flickr.com/photos/diane_krauthamer/53704338195/).

We have all been watching the stunning scenes from Columbia, NYU, USC, UCLA, and across the country, and in the last almost two weeks we have seen this take hold in Vermont, with student encampments at Middlebury, Sterling, and the University of Vermont (UVM) provoking a huge outpouring of support from the campus and local communities. As many have said, students are the conscience of the nation, refusing to accept the normalization of genocide, and they have revitalized the broader movement in solidarity with Palestine.

After seven months of Israel's genocidal assault, following 75 years of Israel's settler colonialism, illegal occupation, and apartheid, solidarity with Palestine has grown dramatically. Our movement has been protesting and agitating for a ceasefire constantly for seven months now, but without having a visible impact on Israel's war on Gaza: After the International Court of Justice confirmed South Africa's charge of genocide, the Biden administration went ahead and rewarded

Israel with \$26 billion in extra funding and heavy munitions. But even while nothing seemingly changes, Palestinian liberation can no longer be stifled and suppressed—it has burst out into every area of life. And everything has changed. The student revolt has revitalized the movement and expanded the demands from ceasefire to **Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions** (<https://bdsmovement.net/>).

Student encampments and direct action have been met in most cases by the armed might of the police wielded by both university administrators and city governments. Republican far right forces have been leading a campaign against “wokism” for years, targeting trans rights and any critical investigation of systemic racism in schools and universities. The opponents of “cancel culture” are happy to cancel anyone who dares to criticize Israel. (Of course we have never been for “cancel culture”: we support freedom of speech. But the first amendment protects all political speech; it doesn’t protect acts of genocide—we are for cancelling war criminals).

These same right-wing forces are some of the most vocal enemies of the campus protests now, leading the New McCarthyism which criminalizes and punishes any advocacy for Palestinians. But the attack on Palestine organizing is fully bipartisan. In fact some of the worst crackdowns have been ordered by liberal administrators, often women and people of color, and approved by Democratic Party mayors. Biden has explicitly supported this criminalization of dissent. His speeches have falsely portrayed the student protests as lawless and antisemitic. Others have added to these slurs the old threat of “outside agitators.”

[The] convergence of union, student, and community struggle is a model of the way forward. Palestine is at the epicenter of a radical convergence of movements.

Let's take a moment to respond to these charges. First, the encampments have been uniformly peaceful—**the only violence** (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/article/2024/may/10/peaceful-pro-palestinian-campus-protests>) has come from provocateurs or the police. Second, the protesters are not antisemitic, they are anti-Zionist, and, as many Jewish voices are warning, the **weaponization of antisemitism** (<https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2023/12/29/steinberg-weaponizing-antisemitism/>) is disturbing and dangerous.

And third, students have organized themselves quite successfully. Any outside forces are there to offer solidarity.

When Zionist and fascist provocateurs have attacked encampments, liberals have given them a free pass while presiding over mass arrests of students and faculty peacefully protesting genocide. This is because U.S. support for Israel itself is bipartisan: The two nations are deeply connected. U.S. imperialism relies on Israel to be its “watchdog” in the Middle East; Israel relies on the U.S. to provide economic support and weapons.

This special relationship explains why both academic and political establishments are largely united behind the use of brute violence and vicious slander to crush dissent. We have seen the viral videos of peaceful students beaten and dragged away by riot cops. We watched riot cops and armored vehicles sweep in to dismantle tents and arrest 90 protesters at Dartmouth. Among them was 65-year-old history professor and former head of Jewish studies Annelise Orleck, who was knocked to the ground and arrested. **Orleck wrote** (<https://twitter.com/AnneliseOrleck1/status/1785901354336104489>) on social media:

Those cops were brutal to me. I promise I did absolutely nothing wrong. I was standing with a line of women faculty in their 60s to 80s trying to protect our students. I have now been banned from the campus where I have taught for 34 years.

She also wrote that the cops “tried to hurt me. They did hurt me. And they seemed to enjoy it.”



Screen shot of the tweet from Annalise Orleck.

And we watched as the chair of philosophy at Emory, Noëlle McAfee, was led away by police and called out to someone to inform the department office. McAfee explained the context in [an interview \(https://www.chronicle.com/article/call-the-philosophy-department-office-and-tell-them-i-have-been-arrested?utm_source=Iterable&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=campaign_9791096_nl_Academe-Today_date_20240508&cid=at&sra=true\)](https://www.chronicle.com/article/call-the-philosophy-department-office-and-tell-them-i-have-been-arrested?utm_source=Iterable&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=campaign_9791096_nl_Academe-Today_date_20240508&cid=at&sra=true) with the *Chronicle of Higher Education*:

Before this it was sunshine. Students were chanting. It's so peaceful. Faculty were gathering around just observing. It's just a beautiful day. Then the Georgia State Patrol just run in and attack. I now know that their mission was to clear the encampment of three tents that had been there for two and a half hours.

They were also clearing anybody who was right there. Students are just being pummeled. And so I go walking a few steps over, and then I see this child on the ground, a 20-year-old being pummeled by the police. There's like two of them pulling and pushing. Her head is on the ground as she curled up in a ball, trying to put her arms over her head to keep them off of her. So I'm standing back six feet holding my camera at them, and I started yelling, "Stop, stop!"

That's when she was arrested.

In the face of state violence, these protests have drawn wide support from the mass movements they are connected to such as Black Lives Matter and Abolitionism. Stop Cop City in Atlanta, for example, has stood in solidarity with the students and faculty at Emory.

The generalization of disproportionate violence to include those, such as senior academics at elite colleges, who would have previously been unlikely to fall foul of police brutality, has only broadened the breadth of support for the movement. When encampments were razed, new ones sprang up, faculty organized human chains to protect their students, and the protests drew widespread support from the campus and broader community despite vilification in much of the news.

On some campuses the encampments continue. Others have been forcibly razed by the state. Others have themselves strategically dismantled, as here in the University of Vermont, so that students can continue the struggle in other ways. In some cases, there have been significant victories, such as [Trinity College Dublin \(https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/may/08/trinity-college-dublin-agrees-to-divest-from-israeli-firms-after-student-protest\)](https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/may/08/trinity-college-dublin-agrees-to-divest-from-israeli-firms-after-student-protest) agreeing to divest from Israel. At UVM just over a week of an encampment won two important victories: some financial disclosure, and, most magnificently, the cancellation of genocide-enabler Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield as commencement speaker.

Whatever the specific story of the encampments, the upsurge in student struggle has given the global solidarity movement hope and inspiration—from the West Bank to Burlington VT. The movement now faces two major questions. The first is how to sustain and build mass support and expand our demands. This is going to be a long struggle. As we watch the brutal attack on Rafah it is obvious that Israel is determined to continue its ethnic cleansing, genocide, and apartheid. And our government continues to lend unconditional support: The indelible bond between Israel's settler colonialism and U.S. imperialism will not easily be broken. So, we

must figure out what kinds of strategies will allow us to hold strong, increase our reach, and keep moving forward: opening up democratic spaces so that widening layers of people can take ownership; engaging in collective campaigns like Apartheid Free Communities, and ultimately building Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions against Israel.

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The force that does have the power to paralyze universities and other workplaces is labor.*

The second question is to do with social power. The student encampments have successfully re-galvanized the movement and drawn renewed attention to Gaza. Students have significant power to ignite and expand movements. But students alone have limited power to change the course of institutions. Yes, in some cases universities have made concessions. But even the biggest and most militant encampments have not paralyzed institutions or done more than temporarily disrupt business as usual.

The force that does have the power to paralyze universities and other workplaces is labor. By withholding our labor, workers can stop business as usual. That's why it's so significant that some unions in the U.S. are making unprecedented moves towards Palestine solidarity. We have seen countless calls for ceasefire, resolutions against genocide, and statements of solidarity with student protesters from locals

and internationals. Many students are themselves workers and are at the forefront of organizing drives and social justice unionism. Here at UVM, Palestine solidarity is bringing staff, faculty, and graduate student workers together in new ways, including in the young but vibrant [Vermont Labor for Palestine](https://www.vermontcpl.org/vermont-labor-for-palestine) (<https://www.vermontcpl.org/vermont-labor-for-palestine>).

We are seeing changes in the labor movement, organic developments that are merging student and worker struggles. The UAW is unionizing more student workers while democratizing its own structures; rank and file pressure from below have led union President Sean Fain to take a principled stand on Palestine.

One of the most significant developments nationally is UAW 4811 at the University of California, which have filed an Unfair Labor Practice over unilateral changes to campus speech policy at UCLA: A strike authorization vote to be held on May 13–15 will involve 48,000 workers in the UC system!

Today's radicals are ... inclined to be pro-labor: More people are seeing the interconnections between global capitalism, U.S. imperialism, systemic racism, and oppression around gender and sexuality.

When merged, the student movement can reinvigorate the labor movement, and the labor movement can provide more social power to the student movement, and this brings us closer to the goals of Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions. One thing making this easier is that campuses are more unionized than ever, and many students are now in unions, which puts them in touch with other workers. Today's

radicals are also more inclined to be pro-labor: More people are seeing the interconnections between global capitalism, U.S. imperialism, systemic racism, and oppression around gender and sexuality. This May Day students and workers showed how to unite in demonstrations across the country.

At Dartmouth, the graduate student workers' union, GOLD-UE, is on strike. Tempest Collective member Nancy Welch, who is an activist in the Palestine solidarity movement there, sent me this [video compilation](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tZ1vBgQ8GLQ) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tZ1vBgQ8GLQ>) of their May Day event and this report of the struggle:

At Monday's General Body Meeting, my understanding is that members voted to support the demands of disclose, divest, and drop the charges against the 90 people arrested at the May Day Labor for Liberation rally. I'm told they scheduled to take up at next Monday's GBM meeting the question of making these demands a condition for ending the strike. The grad students on the picket line and the Palestine Solidarity Committee (PSC) undergrads who are now holding 9 am to 9 pm teach-ins on the Baker Lawn or the lobby of Baker Library are being fed three meals a day M-F by the strike kitchen, organized by DSA but with many students and community members participating. Faculty haven't turned up for kitchen shifts but have signed up to send restaurant meals to the pickets. The strike kitchen dinners have become an organizing space for GOLD and PSC to collaborate and work together.

This convergence of union, student, and community struggle is a model of the way forward. Palestine is at the epicenter of a radical convergence of movements. It is more resistant to co-optation than previous movements because Israel is so fundamental to U.S. imperialism and global capitalism. As the highly political strike at Dartmouth suggests, the political and economic are not separate, but rather they are connected and build on each other. Through Palestine solidarity, the merger of student and worker movements has revolutionary potential that can bring us closer to challenging the entire capitalist system.

Featured image credit: [Wikimedia Commons \(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2024_pro-Palestinian_protests_on_university_campuses\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2024_pro-Palestinian_protests_on_university_campuses); modified by Tempest.

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