

UNITED STATES

“The Working Class has the Power to Stop this Genocide”: Interview with a UAW 4811 Rank and Filer

On Thursday May 15, 48,000 UAW Academic workers voted to authorize a strike, the largest academic workers union in the country to do so. Left Voice interviewed UAW 4811 member Peter Ross about what sparked this historic vote, and the labor movement’s fight for Palestine

Julia Wallace | May 16, 2024



How was UCLA RNF involved at the encampment? Were other unions present?

Rank & File for a Democratic Union, which is a caucus in the student workers' union at the University of California, **UAW 4811**, formed after the last strike, in fall 2022. Several of our members have been active in Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) for a number of years. The **UC Divest Coalition** is a cross-campus coalition of SJP and other student organizations at 5 UC campuses with the mission of forcing the university to divest from its billions of dollars in investments in military contractors and to disclose its assets. We've assisted them with previous actions, including a building occupation at the UC Regents meeting a couple of months ago that provoked an immediate and over-the-top police response. So we have built deep relationships with the SJP and other organizations in the Divest Coalition, and we were involved from the beginning in planning and supporting the encampment. We're the only union organization that is a member of the coalition, but I did see individual workers from a few other unions, including AFSCME, SEIU, and the Roofers Union, come in support near the end.

What relationship does SJP have to the encampment and UC organizing? What do you think of the resurgence of anti-Zionism among Jewish people and youth in particular?

The UC Divest Coalition organized the encampment and has led the protests on this campus for the last 6 months, and over the last several years. The SJP has played a leading role. Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) is also a member organization. There were many Jewish participants in the encampment — a Jewish friend of mine said they'd never seen as much matzah in their life as they'd seen in the encampment. Several leading members of the rank and file caucus are also Jewish, including a member who was a lead of the UCLA encampment, and who played an instrumental role in keeping the encampment together and safe. So it's clear that anti-Zionist Jewish youth are playing an important role in the student movement, and I think this reflects the growing radicalization of the younger generations more generally.

How did the encampment battle go?

The student organizers had followed the encampments at other universities and were well prepared. We started setting up the encampment at 4:00 AM on a Thursday morning to avoid being stopped by campus security. We started to get counter protestors within a few hours — people coming in, yelling and getting in people's faces — but we were ready for that. We had already formed a makeshift barricade and had assigned security marshals who were instructed to de-escalate. But I think the number and ferocity of counter protestors exceeded our expectations, and by the second day, things were already quite tense and stressful as we tried to keep dozens of agitators from entering the camp, where they would record videos of students or attempt to question them or verbally harass them. Still, things stayed very peaceful on our side. We had teach-ins and assemblies, seders, a "People's Library" of books campers donated to loan to each other.



It was on Sunday (April 28) that things began to take a turn. A big Zionist counterprotest was called for that day. The Palestinian Youth Movement (PYM) members came to support the encampment. The two protests came face to face and the Zionist counter protesters began a physical confrontation. For two hours, large Zionist men hurled themselves against the human chain we'd formed, cursing and yelling racist slurs, jabbing people with flag poles, blowing horns in peoples' ears, and in a few instances macing people at point blank range. A member of our caucus was punched in the face. After that, the harassment continued to escalate — sound barrages at all hours, roving groups of three or four going around trying to find a way in, smashing barricades and yelling threats. Proud Boys and fascist YouTubers started showing up, brandishing a knife in one instance. On Monday, a group of around 50 young men tried to storm the front entrance at about midnight. We went out with wooden pallets and shields made from trash cans, lined up, and pushed them back. All of this was the build up to the fascist mob that attacked on Tuesday night.

At around 11:00 PM Tuesday night, I heard a loud explosion. A few seconds later, I saw a firework shot directly into a tent and explode on the ground, and students close by screaming. I rushed to the front barricades and saw a large group of Zionists gathering just outside the encampment who seemed to have appeared out of nowhere. It had clearly been well organized. The crowd grew quickly until there were over 200 of them. Almost the entire camp went up to defend the barricades, but we were clearly outnumbered.

The Zionists started hurling things at us, yelling slurs and threats, grabbing the barricades. Among them were several people with menacing white masks. We could only guess how far they would go, or which weapons they'd brought. The larger group seemed to run forward all at once and let out a yell together, and it looked to me like they would smash through the barricades and start beating people up. But I think the barricades were a bit sturdier than they'd expected and they didn't get through, so instead it turned into a long slog of them trying to rip away the metal fencing and the plywood barricades or trying to push them down onto us, and us trying to hold onto the pieces of wood without getting our hands smashed.



Small clouds of tear gas started exploding here and there, which we tried to disperse with umbrellas, while they would try to use the opportunity of our people coughing and backing away to rip away the plywood. They'd also come up to holes in the plywood barrier and try shooting mace straight into people's eyes. Some people got punched or hit with poles and I know around 25 went to the ER — I know of a person whose hand was smashed badly while holding a barricade, someone whose foot was punctured with a pole, a girl who had blood all over her face. Some of the worst violence was directed against a few people on our side who were defending the barricades from the outside (or had found themselves out there and weren't able to get back in). Without the protection of the barricades, they were set upon and beaten from all sides, kicked when they fell to the ground, etc.

The entire time, the "counter protestors" (I just call them fascists) were screaming all kinds of racist slurs, threats, etc at the top of their lungs. That went on without any kind of lull for 3 hours, until about 2:00 AM, and that entire time, the students — most of them undergrads, 18 and 20 year olds — bravely held the line, encouraged each other, tried to prevent escalation and reign in anyone on our side from retaliating in any way. People on our side kept screaming not to respond, not to throw anything back, and so on, and we chanted "Hold the line for Palestine," "You don't scare us, we're not leaving," and so on. When the cops finally moved in, they let the fascist thugs leave unimpeded.

I read an article in the corporate media implying that the attack was a kind of spontaneous outburst of anger, but there's no doubt in my mind that it was planned. They were there to physically break up the encampment, or at least to beat up campers and intimidate us into leaving. There's no doubt that the university administration was aware of what was happening, and they clearly made a decision to let it happen. UCLA Chancellor Gene Block, we've heard, watched for a while from a balcony above the encampment.

The following day, UC administration announced that they would send in police to sweep the camp. The campus community came out in a tremendous show of support. Around 1,000 students rallied at the entrances of the encampment in order to block entry to the police, and

the police were forced to move back the time of the sweep from 6:00 PM to the middle of the night.

When the police did come, we managed to hold them off for several hours. When the first wave of cops forced their way through an entrance, they were confronted by a crowd of hundreds, and we managed to push them back out of the camp completely. Another group of police attempting to enter via a staircase was held at bay for several hours. When that didn't work, they sent in the California Highway Patrol, fully equipped with riot gear, to tear down the barricades. We lined up, five and six people deep, held onto each other, passed "shields" of plywood and plastic to the front, chanted "You don't scare us, we're not leaving," and kept the riot police from entering for two hours, before they finally broke through. I think that was a powerful statement of determination and strength by the encampment.

What brought on the strike authorization vote by UAW academic workers? Was it initiated by the rank and file or the leadership?

The rank and file caucus has been leading the way on this issue, at least on this campus, since well before October. In a membership meeting immediately after October 7, we raised the need for a response by our union to the imminent invasion of Gaza. Our state-wide executive board soon released an insipid ceasefire statement, but we argued that this wasn't enough and at the next membership meeting in November we introduced a resolution endorsing the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement. This resolution was initially opposed by most of our leadership at UCLA, but it got broad enough among members present at the meeting to pass. We sent the resolution around, and it was soon introduced by rank and file caucuses at other UC campuses, and managed to pass in five of them, though it was blocked by leadership in a couple others. The resolutions were never publicized to the membership, despite our many demands to leadership to do so.

One of the things the resolutions included was a call for a statewide education campaign and referendum on BDS. We were looking to the 2014 BDS referendum in our local as an example of what could be done. They had waged a long and thorough education campaign and had managed to pass an endorsement of BDS, despite a determined Zionist No vote campaign, but the UAW's national leadership had then stepped in and nullified the result. In January, seemingly to head off a rank-and-file-led referendum, our leadership announced a referendum at short notice for the first two days of the new term on whether to "affirm" the executive board's ceasefire statement. There was no time for an education campaign and most of the membership probably weren't even aware the referendum was happening. BDS was relegated to a footnote. Still, the referendum passed with an overwhelming margin. During this time, the rank and file caucus was, as a member of the UC Divest Coalition, helping to organize the demonstrations against the genocide being called on campus.

To their credit, although local leadership was not involved in organizing the encampment, some of them came in support at critical times. I saw a number of union officers for our UCLA unit

during the Zionist counterprotest on Sunday, and they came again on Tuesday night to defend the encampment from the fascist mob. I had a chance to talk to them after the attack, including the local's president and unit chair. We were all shocked by what we'd just seen and we all agreed that the union had to take immediate action, including by taking a strike vote. So the strike vote was called by the leadership of our local, and they deserve some credit for that. However, I would say that the organizing done by the rank and file caucus has been critical to bringing this about, though we have no institutional power at all.

There's a lot of disagreement among the rank and file groups on what the union leadership is up to, because we've always known them to be opportunists and to operate the local in a very top-down manner. My read is that the union leadership, at least at UCLA, genuinely wants a strike — a limited, top-down strike like usual, with a lot of secrets about the tactics and goals (for example, no one had heard about the June 30 end date until we read the ballots) — but a strike nonetheless. At Berkeley, leadership has shut down the possibility of a strike altogether, despite the organizing efforts of the rank and file caucus there. Leadership has gone so far as to phone bank their members to tell them NOT to withhold their labor because they are not on strike. At UCLA, the situation is much different. We are militant and ready to strike. Leadership is not meeting until tomorrow to discuss a start date, but if they don't call us out by Monday (May 20), we will go ahead without them.

What is the significance of the strike authorization now?

On May 15, we learned that the strike vote passed, with nearly 20,000 members voting, and with 79 percent voting Yes. The results were announced at a joint rally with SJP and the Divest Coalition on Nakba Day from the steps of Royce Hall, where the encampment had stood a couple of weeks ago. That's a significant political statement, and it shows how much the membership has been radicalized, above all at this campus. A strike like this simply would not have been possible prior to the encampment, and particularly the attack by the fascist mob, which ripped the mask off of the "counter protestors" and exposed the true nature of Zionism to many of our members on our own campus.

This strike is significant as one of the first times the labor movement has begun to take up the demands of the student protests, above all for divestment. That's a big deal, not least because this could continue to escalate and draw in more workers. ILWU Local 10 has introduced an amazing resolution calling for the whole ILWU to refuse to handle military cargo destined for Israel on the docks. Teamsters Mobilize, a rank and file caucus in the Teamsters, has issued a statement in solidarity with our strike and promising not to cross our picket lines, although the Teamsters bureaucracy has so far not said a word. The technical workers in UPTE have also promised not to cross our picket line, and we've also gotten support from some members of AFT. What is needed now is to further expand the anti-war movement in the working class. The rank and file caucus at UCLA is planning to host a cross-union town hall or panel next week, to get

rank and file workers from different unions in contact, and hopefully to form a joint labor outreach committee.

This strike is also significant in that it brings us into direct opposition with the Democratic Party. It was California governor Gavin Newsom who called the CHP on us. We know who the UC Regents are and who we're really fighting.

The blame for the police response is being pinned almost exclusively on Chancellor Block, but it's unthinkable that a three-hour confrontation with a violent mob on the campus of one of the state's premier universities could have happened without the knowledge of Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass or Governor Newsom. The Zionists on the UC Board of Regents would no doubt have preferred that the crackdown had come earlier. The UC Regents themselves are comprised in large part of ultra-wealthy business tycoons and political operatives, and the UC, as one of the key institutions in the state, is closely connected with the state's Democratic Party. When we make the demand for divestment, we are therefore coming into direct conflict with the military contractors headquartered in Los Angeles and the tech corporations in the Bay Area, as well as with the political interests that govern the state.

The police attacks on the UC protests are part of a relentless crackdown by the political establishment nationwide. Chancellor Block is appearing before Congress next week at the same time that the UCLA campus will be on strike. There's no doubt that the right-wing politicians questioning him will demand even harsher measures to break up the strike.

The UAW itself has ties to the Democratic Party. President Shawn Fain has a contradiction on his hands, in that while on the one hand he releases statements solidarizing himself with the students and their democratic rights, on the other hand he endorses 'Genocide Joe' Biden for president, and votes against a resolution in his union for the UAW to divest. The Democrats are the ones attacking the students. When the university deploys the police against our picket lines, and the political establishment rails against the right of unions to take a political stand, the UAW will have to pick a side.

But the UAW bureaucracy is **politically subordinated to the Democrats**, and our local leadership — despite some of them displaying a degree of radicalism in recent weeks, including by taking the initiative to call a strike — remain a part of that structure. Rank and file power is the alternative to the union apparatus. We build it by taking matters into our own hands, by educating and organizing each other, and by building instruments of direct democracy such as people's assemblies that can begin to transfer power over the conduct of a strike out of the hands of the union apparatus and into the hands of ordinary workers.

The Rank and File Caucus Instagram account mentioned support for the strike but a need for expansion. In what way should the strike be expanded, and why do they think the demands could go further?

A key demand that has been left out of the official strike demands is ‘cops off campus.’ We think that the events of the last weeks powerfully demonstrate that the policing of campus puts students and workers at risk. Chancellor Block’s new Office of Campus Safety, to be headed by Campus Police Czar Rick Braziel, is an attempt to further expand police powers on this campus. The office must be dissolved immediately. And we need to go further, and roll back the militarization and policing of campus, which endangers especially our students of color, and replace the UCPD with a community safety committee run by workers, students, and others in the campus community, and answerable to us, not to the chancellor.

We also need to clarify and concretize what we mean by respecting the right to free speech, and what we mean by divestment, and bring these demands in line with **those of the student movement and encampment**. These are the sorts of problems our expanded demands are meant to address.

The UC workers went on strike a few years ago. Is there any influence of that in Local 4811 and this vote?

Yes. The rank and file caucus came together as a result of that strike. The strike radicalized members, introduced them to organizing and the possibilities of a strike, and also introduced many of us to the union bureaucracy. We saw first hand a leadership that was not responsive to the membership, that centralized power and tended to exclude smaller and more vulnerable groups of student workers.

This time around, we have some experience with disruptive actions like delivery pickets, with maintaining energy among our members, and with fighting for union democracy, and we’re ready to start a powerful new round of direct actions. I think we’ll have about half the numbers of the last strike (maybe a quarter of the unit at UCLA), but twice the militancy. Unlike last time, our caucus will start delivery pickets and disruptive direct actions from the very beginning. We have hundreds of student workers who will help us, and leadership is not in a position to reign these actions in. We also plan to hold people’s assemblies, inspired by those at UNAM in Mexico City, that will be responsible for planning the direction of the strike. We see these assemblies as a key means of building rank and file power and an alternative to the top-down way our union is currently run.

Our leadership wants to operate this strike as a “stand up strike,” in which the campuses will be called out one by one, and maybe not ever. I don’t buy this strategy. I think it’s basically just a way to put a nice spin on some campuses being less ready to strike than others. Our leaders tell us maximizing secrecy over the schedule of the strikes will “maximize chaos” for the UC, but I think the membership should be involved in determining when we go out. A strong and unified strike will impact the university far more than any “chaos” due to uncertain timing.

The situation is explosive. The police attacked UC Irvine and Berkeley just yesterday (May 15), and I expect the UC will try to bring the hammer down on the union as well, both with legal actions and probably with the police. If the Democrats are bold enough to attack UAW members

on the picket line with police, then we can only turn to the labor movement to defend us. If broader layers of the labor movement really start to take up this fight, we can win this fight for divestment. We're only one small local, but the working class has the power to stop this genocide.

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Julia Wallace

Julia is a contributor for Left Voice and has been a revolutionary socialist for over ten years. She served on the South Central Neighborhood Council in Los Angeles and is a member of SEIU Local 721. Julia organizes against police brutality and in defense of LGBTQ, women, and immigrants' rights. When she's not actively fighting the patriarchy, white supremacy and/or capitalism, she enjoys many things: she loves Thundercat, plays ultimate frisbee and is a founder of the team, "Black Lives Hammer."

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