

LABOR MOVEMENT

University of California Academic Workers Authorize Strike to Defend the Right to Protest

48,000 workers are one step closer to going on strike to demand that charges and academic sanctions be dropped for the students and faculty who protest the genocide in Palestine and UC's financial and academic ties to Israel.

Madeleine Freeman | May 16, 2024



Photo Credit: UAW Labor for Palestine. This picture was taken at a march in Brooklyn in December.

On May 15 — Nakba Day, the international day of commemoration for the displacement and massacres that forced Palestinians from their lands to create of the state of Israel — the largest

union of academic workers in the United States, UAW 4811, voted to authorize a strike in protest of the repression against pro-Palestinian activism on the University of California system's campuses. With 79 percent voting in favor, this outcome brings 48,000 academic workers across 10 universities one step closer to a strike to defend the Palestine movement and the right to protest. The executive board of the union will decide this week whether to move ahead with a first round of "stand up" strikes at individual campuses.

You might be interested in: [Declaration from the Youth of the Trotskyist Fraction – Fight to End the Genocide in Gaza and the Repression of the Palestine Movement!](#)

UAW 4811 represents over 48,000 academic workers, graduate students, postdocs, and researchers. According to the union, about 20,000 workers participated in the vote to authorize a strike to protest the university's severe repression of students and academic workers participating in encampments and pro-Palestine protests over the last several weeks. The union accuses the university system of **unfair labor practices**, including violating the "right to engage in peaceful protest at the worksite" and suspending student workers. In other words, UAW 4811 is poised to strike until the university agrees to drop criminal charges and academic sanctions against the hundreds of students and workers who have been targeted by their universities for pro-Palestine speech and protest.

The union made the historic move to call the strike authorization vote after university administrators imposed a harsh crackdown on the "Gaza Solidarity" encampments that have been established in over 100 campuses across the United States. Student and faculty protesters are demanding an end to Israel's genocide against the Palestinian people and are calling on their universities to disclose and divest their investments from the state of Israel. They are shining a light on the deep economic ties that bind the United States and the other imperialist powers and Israel together – relationships that have politically supported and funded Israel's settler colonial project in Palestine for 76 years as well as the murder of over 35,000 Palestinians since October 7. The encampments have spread across the world, from Europe to Latin America.

Calling the protests "antisemitic," "violent," and the initiative of so-called "outside agitators," university administrators have called on local governments and the police to break up the occupations. Over 2,000 students and faculty have been arrested in the past month alone in the United States. Many are facing a range of charges, including felonies. They risk expulsion, suspension, eviction, and the loss of jobs and income.

The repression has been particularly brutal on UC campuses. On April 30, the encampment at UCLA was **attacked by Zionist groups** for hours; the attackers used chemical sprays, fireworks, and other weapons to assault the peaceful protesters at the encampment. Dozens of people were injured in the attack. Meanwhile, LAPD stood by, refusing to respond for hours. Encampment and community members defended themselves; the day after the brutal Zionist attack over 1,000 people mobilized to protect the encampment.

After seeing the strong showing of support for the encampment, LAPD entered the scene to finish the job started by the Zionist group. They violently broke up the encampment and arrested over 100 students and university workers. The cops were also sent in to sweep the encampment established at UC San Diego. Nearly 100 people were arrested. Students face immediate suspension. On Wednesday, UC Irvine called law enforcement onto campus to sweep the encampment that stood for two weeks and to clear a lecture hall that had been taken over by hundreds of students.

As we have seen on campuses across the country, faculty and academic workers are putting their bodies on the line to protect their students and colleagues. UAW workers marched to defend the encampment at NYU and faculty locked arms to prevent the cops from descending upon their students. CUNY faculty marched to keep the police from entering an encampment set up at City College.

But academic unions are going further as the repression ramps up, building on the ceasefire statements they issued since the state of Israel began its latest genocidal assault on Palestine. CUNY faculty staged a **sick out** in solidarity with the demands of the encampment, to protest the university's violent crackdown, and to demand that the charges against students and workers be dropped immediately. Columbia University student workers are also staging a sick out in defense of student and worker protesters.

Now UAW 4811 is using its considerable might to defend the right to protest, linking arms with the student movement and threatening to use the greatest weapon in their arsenal — the strike. According to a statement by the union, the workers are **demanding**:

- 1. Amnesty for all academic employees, students, student groups, faculty, and staff who face disciplinary action or arrest due to protest.*
- 2. Right to free speech and political expression on campus.*
- 3. Divestment from UC's known investments in weapons manufacturers, military contractors, and companies profiting from Israel's war on Gaza.*
- 4. Disclosure of all funding sources and investments, including contracts, grants, gifts, and investments, through a publicly available, publicly accessible, and up-to-date database.*
- 5. Empower researchers to opt out from funding sources tied to the military or oppression of Palestinians. The UC must provide centralized transitional funding to workers whose funding is tied to the military or foundations that support Palestinian oppression.*

With the authorization of the strike, UAW workers are saying definitively that their unions are sites of struggle — against exploitation in their workplaces, but also against the attacks by the state on our democratic rights. This is already stirring fear in the hearts of university administrators. As one spokeswoman for the University of California **admitted in a statement**:

[the university system] “believes that a strike sets a dangerous precedent that would introduce non-labor issues into labor agreements.”

They fear the entry of the labor movement into the fight for Palestine and they fear the growth of the influence of a sector of the labor movement that fights against exploitation and oppression together with their own methods that can bring the university and the economy to a halt.

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Now that members have voted in favor of a strike, the union leadership will be able to call a strike at any time. But it should be up to rank-and-file workers to decide when and for how long they strike. 48,000 workers is a considerable force that can tip the scales in the favor of the protesters under fire in California; they made that clear in the 2022 strike across all UC campuses for direly needed improvements to wages and benefits. But harnessing the full extent of that power requires the active participation of rank-and-file members deciding how to move ahead with the struggle and, crucially, how to expand their support to the other sectors of the movement.

With the universities and the state escalating their repression against protesters and the movement at a crossroads, in order to amplify and impose the demands of the protesters, it is necessary to solidify the unity of the working class and the student movement and in doing so expand the movement for Palestine. As we saw at CUNY, the encampments [brought together students and faculty to discuss and deliberate](#) the way forward for the struggle against repression and for a Free Palestine. Building from this perspective, it is necessary for workers and students to come together in common spaces, like assemblies, that are independent of the influence of university administrations and the state to [forge a plan for the struggles ahead](#) — to debate strategy and vote on common actions democratically in order to expand the movement.

This coordination is necessary to mount a broad campaign that defends the right to protest and demands that all the charges against protesters and all sanctions against those who speak out for Palestine are dropped. It means drawing new sectors into the struggle as well. The prospect of a strike by UC academic workers shows us an entire horizon. UAW represents over 400,000 workers in the United States. Organizing a call from the rank-and-file, workers can demand that the union make good on its statements for a ceasefire and denunciations of the repression and enter the fray across sectors — mounting broad labor actions that can throw a wrench into the imperialist war machine.

The crackdown on those protesting the genocide in Palestine and the complicity of the imperialist states and their allies is setting a dangerous precedent that can hamstring our future movements and struggles against exploitation and oppression. The action taken by UAW 4811 workers this week to authorize a strike in defense of the right to protest is a powerful move to unify the labor movement and the student movement in the fight for Palestine. Now it's up to the rank-and-file workers to decide to use that power to strike.



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