

LABOR MOVEMENT

University of California Student Workers Begin Historic Political Strike against Repression and Genocide

This week, student and postdoctoral workers at the University of California began a historic strike in response to the brutal, violent repression of students, faculty, and staff protesting for Palestine. The action marks an important escalation of the labor movement's struggle in defense of Palestine and the right to protest.

Olivia Wood | May 21, 2024



Image: Olivia Wood

On May 20, University of California (UC) student and postdoc workers at the Santa Cruz campus began a historic strike against the repression of the student movement. UAW 4811, which represents over 48,000 workers, voted last week to **authorize a strike** in response to intense repression unleashed against students and faculty protesting for Palestine. Administrators at several University of California campuses invited in the police, who violently arrested and injured students, faculty, and staff. Many workers and students across the UC system also face disciplinary action from their universities, including suspension. The violence was particularly intense at UCLA, where in addition to police violence, encampment participants and their supporters were **brutalized by right-wing mobs** on multiple occasions while the university did little to intervene.

The UAW 4811 workers' current contract, which was won by a historic strike across all of the UC campuses, includes a no-strike clause, making their current actions especially significant as they are not technically allowed to engage in work stoppage. However, the state of California protects strikes in the case of Unfair Labor Practices (ULPs) being committed against workers in certain instances. The union has filed ULP charges against the University for depriving workers and students of their right to protest.

While the action is technically a ULP strike, it is deeply political. The workers' demands are:

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.

Rank-and-file workers from the UCLA campus have also adopted additional demands, including full coverage of medical expenses accrued by those injured during the repression, cops off campus, the resignation of UCLA chancellor Gene Block, and transitional funding for workers who choose to reject employment and/or funds that are tied to the state of Israel.

Although the law allows for some ULP strikes to be protected even if workers are under contract and subject to a no-strike clause, the legality of this strike is unclear, and the university has filed a **counter-ULP charge** asking the Public Employee Relations Board (PERB) to issue a cease and desist order to the union. UAW 4811 workers are taking a risk above and beyond the normal risks associated with going on strike, and they are doing so to protect their democratic right to protest, to stand against genocide, and to use their labor power to amplify the struggle put forward by students at the **Gaza Solidarity Encampments** (GSE). UC-AFT, the union representing

non-tenure track instructors and librarians at the University of California, has also filed a ULP charge against the university, although they have not taken a strike authorization vote.

UAW 4811 workers join many other academic workers in taking labor action in defense of Palestine and the right to protest. At Columbia University, the symbolic epicenter of the recent surge in student activism, student workers are currently engaging in **an ongoing sickout** in response to the extreme repressive measures taken against pro-Palestine students and faculty. At the **University of Texas at Austin**, faculty engaged in an illegal 24-hour work stoppage following the repression of their students' GSE. At the City University of New York, faculty engaged in the **first work stoppage** in their union's 52-year history, illegally engaging in a one-day wildcat strike after their students were beaten and arrested in a police sweep of their encampment.

As the state intensifies its ongoing repression of the movement for Palestine, labor actions such as this can, and will, play a definitive role in the future of the movement. If more sectors of labor enter the stage of struggle in this way, we can shift the balance of forces in our favor. Our ability to withhold our labor, leveraged in defense against repression, creates a situation in which repression of our right to protest does not go unchecked, the state can not act with bold impunity, and our movement is not so easily squashed. This can create the conditions for a stronger movement, backed by labor power, which can challenge the U.S. imperialist investment in Israel and, importantly, set the stage for more political strikes in the future.

 **Higher Education** | **UC Strike** |



Olivia Wood

Olivia is a writer and editor at Left Voice and lecturer in English at the City University of New York (CUNY).

LABOR MOVEMENT
