

California's Academic Strike for Free Speech and Palestine

BY

ALEX N. PRESS

The recent violence against Palestine encampments across the University of California system has led to an unprecedented labor response: a strike by UAW Local 4811 over alleged violation of rights to free speech and peaceful protest.

When Peter Ross heard an explosion in the encampment at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) on the night of April 30, he didn't know what it was. He witnessed supporters of Israel attack fellow students the day prior, so he expected a confrontation. But this was worse than he'd imagined.

"I was on the other side of the camp and heard a loud explosion," Ross, a UCLA graduate worker whom *Jacobin* has granted a pseudonym due to the doxing of pro-Palestinian UCLA students, recalled. "It could have been a bomb for all I knew. And then I saw fireworks shot into the camp explode on the ground, and there were students screaming. I ran up to the barricade and I saw a huge group of people who seemed like they just came out of nowhere."

The vigilantes were playing "Meni Mamtera," a children's song Israel Defense Forces (IDF) soldiers use on Palestinian prisoners as a form of noise torture.

"The group gathering there and playing that menacing song was a threat of extreme violence," Ross said. "We all understood that immediately."

In the hours that followed, the pro-Israel mob, many of them nonstudents, rained violence down upon those inside the encampments, not only shooting fireworks directly into the camp but beating students with poles and their bare hands and trying to tear down the barricades surrounding the camp, with their violence sending dozens to the hospital. As it unfolded, law enforcement stood nearby, watching. No arrests took place that night.

“The officers who stood aside were the Los Angeles Police Department [LAPD], and there may have been some members of the California Highway Patrol,” Marie Salem, a UCLA public health PhD student and media liaison for both the encampment and the campus’s Palestine liberation collective, told me. “The other group that was standing by on the stairs, laughing at us, were guards from the Apex Security Group, which is hired by the university and has been on campus every day since that attack even though they just stood there and watched.”

“Either the university was hesitant to do anything to get law enforcement involved, or law enforcement was dealing with authorization issues and political considerations from elected officials,” Ed Davis, a former Boston police commissioner, told the *New York Times*.

The UC system’s unionized graduate workers, postdocs, and researchers are now on strike over the events of April 30 and May 1, as well as similar if less extreme police crackdowns at UC Irvine and UC San Diego (UCSD). United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 4811, which represents the forty-eight thousand workers, says the administration’s actions constitute unfair labor practices (ULPs). According to the union, “many of those arrested had spent the previous night seeking medical care or hospitalization after being physically attacked and maced by a group of anti-Palestinian counter-protesters,” and “though UCLA and LAPD were on notice of the attacks, they deliberately failed to respond.” The strike is all but unprecedented in the US labor movement, which has long been almost entirely unified in support of Israel and rarely carries out strikes so closely related to foreign policy issues like this one or issues of key democratic rights.

“At the heart of this is our right to free speech and peaceful protest,” Local 4811 president Rafael Jaime, a graduate worker in the English department at UCLA, told the *Guardian*. “If members of the academic community are maced and beaten down for peacefully demonstrating on this issue, our ability to speak up on all issues is threatened.”

“As we were running around with medics, trying to keep each other safe while staring at the university-hired security and the police, we realized this university would rather see us dead than even consider divesting, than even consider disclosing, than even consider calling this a genocide,” Salem said, referring to demands students at UCLA and around the country have leveled at their administrations

to oppose Israel's assault on Palestine. "We were abandoned — and that's how Gazans feel about the entire world, every single day."

Amnesty and Divestment

Local 4811's contract, like those of many unionized workers, has a no-strike clause, but that doesn't prevent members from engaging in a work stoppage over ULP charges. Since May 3, the union has filed and amended such charges to account for additional alleged violations with California's Public Employment Relations Board (PERB), which oversees public sector labor relations, charging that the university's actions "suppress the speech of its workers who are engaged in concerted activity relating to their terms and conditions of employment." (Graduate workers at Brown University, Harvard University, and the University of Southern California have also filed ULP charges over similar unilateral changes by their respective administrations.)

According to Local 4811, UCLA's administration waited nearly three hours to request police action, by which time many of the attackers had fled. The union says that in addition to standing in solidarity with the people of Palestine, workers like Ross and Salem "were demanding numerous workplace-related changes" when they were attacked and subsequently arrested, including creating a right for workers to "opt out of participation in military-funded research as part of employment, opposing the discrimination and hostile work environment directed toward Palestinian, Muslim, and pro-Palestine Jewish employees and students, and requesting the disclosure and divestment of university funds from Israel's war effort."

The UC American Federation of Teachers (UC-AFT), which represents 6,500 librarians and faculty across the UC system, also filed a ULP in May over the university's conduct, writing in a news release that "charges include the university's failure to maintain safe working conditions, disregarding the free speech rights of its employees, and unilateral decision-making regarding changes in their working conditions in responding to recent campus protests at UCLA and UCSD."

Local 4811's charges — and others alleging that the university has unilaterally imposed new disciplinary procedures for student-workers like Ross and Salem, who were arrested on May 1 — are the basis of the strike, which has now spread to three UC campuses. The local called the work stoppage on May 17, adopting the "stand up strike" model pioneered during the UAW's Big Three auto strike last

fall, a minority strike model that has workers walk out in discrete waves, with the number of strikers growing over time.

The UC administration has nonetheless argued that the work stoppage is illegal and sought an injunction to end it, citing “irreparable harm” to the university and its students should the strike continue. PERB has thus far declined that request, though it left the case open to allow for an injunction should the administration provide evidence supporting its charge. In an op-ed for the *Daily Bruin*, UCLA’s student newspaper, UCLA law professor Noah Zats disputed the administration’s characterization of the strike as illegal, writing, “Although the UC’s letter expresses mystification at what any of this has to do with employment, the connection should be obvious: the UC is a workplace.”

The ULPs are the basis for the strike, but union members hope it can push the divestment movement forward too, using their leverage to escalate pressure on the UC system to divest itself from investments tied to Israel’s genocidal violence against the Palestinian people, which has now killed an estimated thirty-six thousand people in the Gaza Strip, as well as more than five hundred Palestinians in the West Bank.

At a Board of Regents meeting in May, UC chief investment officer Jagdeep Singh Bachher said the divestment movement’s demands would implicate some \$32 billion of the university system’s \$175 billion in assets. Bachher’s comments come in response to a letter he received from the UC Divest Coalition, which asked for a halt to investments in weapons manufacturers, investment firms Blackstone and BlackRock, and some two dozen other companies.

According to Bachher, the movement’s demands would apply to investments that include: \$3.3 billion in holdings from groups with ties to weapons manufacturers; \$12 billion in US treasuries; \$163 million in BlackRock and \$2.1 billion in bonds managed by BlackRock; \$8.6 billion from Blackstone; and \$3.2 billion from the twenty-four other companies. In April, the UC system said it would not boycott or divest from Israel, and the regents did not change that position during the mid-May meetings. In 1986, following widespread student protest, the regents divested \$3.1 billion from companies doing business with South Africa’s apartheid government; the UC website celebrates that history.

“The most important demand is divestment,” Ross said. “That’s what started all of this and that is that is the material way in which the student movement is fighting to defend Palestinians. The university has vast financial assets; it holds billions of dollars in military contractors in its stock portfolio. As in the South African divestment movement, in which the university divested its assets, we want the university to divest its assets again.”

“University administrations, united together, are profiting off of this war, and that means people standing up against the war are a threat,” Salem said. “One reason they’re united is because congressional hearings, lobbyist groups, donors, and weapons manufacturers have put immense pressure on and work in collaboration with administrations to repress Palestinian and pro-Palestinian voices. We’re here to say: that doesn’t work and it will never work. We will not be intimidated and we will take up space on campus until the day that we divest.”

“Workers represented by our union have been getting interim suspensions and highly unusual disciplinary charges, including being physically barred from campus, which has severe implications for people who live on campus,” Stefan Yong, a PhD student in UC Santa Cruz’s (UCSC) history of consciousness department, told me. “The workplace is where this repression happened, and in many cases, the people who this happened to are workers who were protesting in solidarity with Palestine and received adverse consequences for it which are totally irregular and not in line with the due process of discipline in our contract.”

UCSC Stands Up

On May 20, Local 4811’s roughly two thousand members at UCSC were the first to walk off the job; on May 27, the twelve thousand members at UCLA and UC Riverside joined them. This morning, UCSD and UC Santa Barbara joined them, with UC Irvine set to walk out on Wednesday, bringing the total number of strikers up to 31,500.

UCSC’s union members were preparing to strike weeks before Local 4811 called on them to be the first UC employees to walk off the job. The campus is a hotbed of labor radicalism, having waged a wildcat strike in 2020 and overwhelmingly voted against ratifying the UC-wide 2022 contract even after six weeks on strike. On May 1 of this year, UCSC members held a one-day walkout in solidarity with Palestine; UCSC students launched an encampment the same day.

“The walkout was a decision that was reached by roughly 250 to 300 people in a late-night meeting on the back of some twenty-four department meetings in a three-day period,” Jack Davies, a PhD student in the school’s history of consciousness department and the former UCSC unit chair, told me. At those meetings, union members discussed how to strengthen the campus divestment movement as well as answer calls for solidarity issued by a broad coalition of Palestinian trade unions.

“The working class has no country, and what’s happening in Palestine is a war on workers too, and on academic workers without question,” Davies explained, referencing Israel’s bombing of every university in the Gaza Strip. And while it’s no surprise that Davies’s department, where Angela Davis is a professor emeritus, is a pillar of strike support, workers in the hard sciences have been leading graduate-worker solidarity with Palestine too.

STEM students are especially likely to have their work used for war and policing, and months ago, UCSC graduate workers wrote a guide for researching militarized funding on university campuses. Members of the physics and astronomy departments published statements committing to refuse to collaborate with federal military institutions and private arms and defense companies in any of their work. Such efforts offer an example of how to connect the conditions of one’s day-to-day work to broader questions of employer control and political struggles.

“[STEM students are] the ones who have been organizing since October around research funding from the Department of Defense,” Davies said. “Physics and astronomy have been the best-positioned to respond to the current moment. They’re ubiquitous on the picket line and in meetings and planning.”

The union wants the UC system to establish transitional funding for workers who want to transfer to other laboratories or research projects should they find themselves employed on a project to which they object, as well if they need to escape an abusive work environment — a not-uncommon situation for graduate workers whose employment is tied to a principal investigator. Workers at the University of Michigan have fought for similar transitional funding, a precedent UC workers cite as a model.

On Wednesday, May 29, student protesters at UCSC blockaded both entrances to the college campus. At the west entrance, pro-Palestinian students placed rocks in the street to prevent vehicles from crossing. Standing amid splattered red paint, the students held a banner reading, “Palestine will be free.”

On the night of May 30, UCSC administration called on the police to dismantle the encampment, which had moved closer to the grad workers’ picket line when the strike began. By Friday, an estimated eighty students and three faculty members had been detained.

From UCLA to . . .

On the morning of May 26 at UCLA's Royce Quad, not far from where the pro-Israel mob had attacked students, striking grad workers manned the picket line. UCLA's academic senate has told faculty that they "cannot be required to take on additional responsibilities for teaching related to a work," and hundreds of professors have pledged not to pick up struck work and to withhold grade submissions all the way through June 30, the date at which Local 4811 says members will end the strike. Under the Higher Education Employer-Employee Relations Act (HEERA), faculty have the right both to honor the picket line in full and not replace struck labor.

UCLA professor Robin D. G. Kelley, a historian who is a member of the school's Task Force on Anti-Palestinian, Anti-Muslim, and Anti-Arab Racism and has himself written about the administration's responsibility for unleashing violence on campus, brought a scheduled guest speaker, Wayne State University African American studies professor Charisse Burden-Stelly, to the picket line rather than teaching his usual class. As in the Gaza solidarity encampments' "popular universities," it's a glimpse of a different vision of education, one that speaks to the issues of the moment rather than trying to suppress them.

"We are standing up for justice in the workplace, in a way that directly affects not just us, but our students," Anny Vilorio Winnett, the UCLA unit chair, told the Associated Press, adding that the union is taking on a "fight for our ability to be safe on campus, our ability to have free speech and protest on our campus, but it's also a fight that our students led . . . and we're just a continuation of that."

As for the events of April 30 and May 1, workers want amnesty for all arrestees and those facing disciplinary action as well as negotiations over workplace changes made by the administration as part of its crackdown on political speech. Some UCLA union members are also pressing for an independent investigation into how the pro-Israel attack was allowed to unfold, rather than one led by the university or affiliated institutions.

"It's hard to believe that the police stood down for almost three hours without a degree of consent at least, if not collaboration with, city and state government," Ross told me. "The crackdown at universities has been a nationwide campaign; we should have a committee set up by the union or the LA Labor Federation that could do an investigation to get to the bottom of who made these decisions and the role of Democratic Party political officials. It's important to get an answer for who is responsible for all of this."

"In searching for historical analogies or precedents, the one that keeps coming up as apartheid, South Africa and the student movement, particularly in the second half of the 1980s," UCSC's Davies told

me. “A major difference right now compared to then is the depth and organization of academic labor that can accompany the student movements.” He continued:

The labor movement in the US and the Palestine solidarity movement are both looking for recent, material models to replicate. We’ll see, but my hope would be that workers — initially in higher ed, given our proximity to the student movement, but there’s no reason why it couldn’t go beyond that — could pick up this model and take it forward. Workers around this country in all kinds of sectors have been fired, disciplined, and silenced for even very modest expressions of solidarity with Palestine. If we can take the fight all the way through and ramp up pressure on the university, you never know what that might inspire.

CONTRIBUTORS

Alex N. Press is a staff writer at *Jacobin* who covers labor organizing.

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