

Building Solidarity with Palestine through Labor Organizing: The UAW Strike at the UC

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The University of California Santa Cruz (UCSC) campus has been a hotspot of labor organizing in higher education since a wild-cat strike in 2019 to end “rent burden” among graduate workers, a demand later taken up in a systemwide contract strike in 2022, which *Politico* called the “largest walkout in US education” (Jones 2022). When pro-Palestinian encampments sprouted across the country last spring, grad student workers at UCSC moved to heed the call from the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions for strikes on May Day (May 1) and Nakba Day (May 15). An unsanctioned walkout on May Day at UCSC coincided with vigilante and police attacks on the encampment at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), laying the ground for United Auto Workers 4811 (UAW 4811), the local representing nearly 50k academic workers at University of California (UC), to lodge unfair labor practice charges and announce a strike authorization vote. By May 20, workers at UCSC were the first to hit the picket line, joined by several other UC campuses in subsequent weeks. The strike demanded amnesty, divestment, and transitional funding for researchers to leave projects funded by the Department of Defense and related agencies.

This strike is a highpoint in the recent wave of labor union support for a ceasefire in Palestine, including high-level statements from the official leadership of the United Auto Workers, United Electrical, and the American Postal Workers Union. For those of us active in union organizing at UCSC, where an encampment was also established on May 1st, our initiatives to build worker support for divestment from Israel could be taken up on a wider basis and with far greater urgency in the strike against administrative inroads against rights of protest and dissent, and in the context of the student movement.

Those who study social movements, especially in the Middle East and since 2011, have long grappled with the relationship between apparently spontaneous popular uprising and the slower rhythms and rigors of labor organizing and action. The sequence of resistance initiated in Palestine in 1936 included, famously, a general strike that remained an important historical reference for the 2021 Karameh strike—to say nothing of the massive strikes and refusals of the First Intifada. Moreover, scholars have bristled against mainstream depictions of the 2011 uprisings as spontaneously emerging from a vacuum, with origins in social media, pointing out

that workers' collective actions in the region peaked after 2004, especially in Tunisia and Egypt (Beinin 2020).

In the U.S., the union movement—if not workers themselves—has for a long time largely acceded to a framework that narrowly scripts what counts as a “labor issue.” This made the decision of UAW 4811 to authorize a “stand up” strike on UC campuses (explicitly modeled on the UAW’s Big Three auto strike of 2023) especially noteworthy. While UC administrators called it a “dangerous and far-reaching precedent” (University of California 2024), partisans of the labor movement analyzed it in terms of the history of “political strikes” in the United States (Frank 2024). Yet at the same time, how the boss disciplines worker dissent, invests the money, and the future application of our research are also fundamentally “labor issues.”

The nature of strikes and strike strategy in the university, a live question in the U.S. and abroad, forces considerations of how different workers relate to one another, especially in the supercharged context of the Palestine solidarity movement. At UCSC, where the strike started and went longest, the major form of leverage was understood to lie in the non-submission of final grades, the closest thing to a synchronous “choke point” in the labor process of higher ed workers. The amount of missing grades was therefore constantly mapped at UCSC, but because only grads were officially and directly on strike (lecturers and senate faculty in UC are either in another union or unrepresented), this strategy depended on a baseline of coordination and solidarity among instructional workers. As only one layer of the instructional workforce in most courses, grad workers cannot alone ensure the withholding of grading labor and grade submission. Groups of

lecturers (organized in UC-AFT) and senate faculty at UCSC—the only faculty association in UC with collective bargaining rights—assiduously sought pledges from their membership not to pick up struck labor (i.e. not completing grading themselves) and, in certain cases, to assert their rights not to cross the picket line (therefore striking their own teaching and administrative responsibilities). The legal structure of the strike permitted different levels of “protected” solidarity among these two sets of workers, depending on their contracts, to say nothing of their widely differential job security.

Cross-unit organizing was therefore fundamental to the possibility of success in this strike, just as it always sets limits on the ability of any one group of workers to achieve their aims in the university. This brought challenges but also some significant wins. Unionization among faculty has been slower than among graduate students, and the relationship between graduate workers and faculty members is often conditioned by structures of mentorship where the role of ‘student’ takes precedence over that of ‘comrade.’ Organizing faculty has also meant inviting colleagues to think about forms of power that can be built outside the deteriorating structures of shared governance, or in ways that focus on non-binding senate resolutions and statements rather than the withholding of labor. It speaks volumes, for example, that the Academic Senate at UCLA rejected the censure of their chancellor after the attack on the pro-Palestinian encampment in May, while faculty organizers effectively mobilized to secure solidarity pledges with the strike.

Yet despite these challenges, the developing solidarity between UAW 4811 and Santa Cruz Faculty Association (SCFA) proved pivotal to the strength of the Palestine strike this past

spring, It remained critical even as a temporary restraining order was issued against strike activity after the UC went “jurisdiction shopping” in Orange County, having twice failed to secure injunctions from the Public Employment Relations Board. This legal maneuvering, California’s version of red-state lawfare, prompted different sets of workers at UCSC to push their unity beyond the familiar and comfortable limits of labor law. Since 2019, grad worker organizing on campus has spurred faculty to clarify our individual and collective rights under Higher Education Employer-Employee Relations Act (HEERA), which the SCFA repeatedly upheld in the face of multiple attempts by administration to intimidate instructors (Taft 2023). At a broad level, the successive experiences of strikes at UCSC and UAW’s insistence that Palestine was a labor issue—in terms of university investments and funding, worker control over research, and the capacity to express dissent at work—helped faculty sharpen their vision in advocating for a more truly public university.

Having conversations with colleagues about these issues at the individual level, but also through departments, gave faculty a better sense of their own power and helped encourage collaboration across units and across campuses. In the most recent strike last spring, impressive numbers of faculty and lecturers refused to accede to the administration’s demands to snitch on striking workers or to make up for missed labor, even after the official conclusion of the strike. While far from complete or perfect, this represents a noteworthy advance since the wildcat strike in 2019, and moreover points towards future directions here and elsewhere. More recently, on 19 September 2024, the Council of University of California Faculty Associations filed an Unfair Labor Practice complaint

(ULP) with California’s Public Employment Relations Board. The 581 document details the myriad ways in which the UC has suppressed pro-Palestinian speech and protest (The Council of UC Faculty Associations, 2024). Such a step undoubtedly represents a milestone, but our recent experience tells us that it will need to have the force of concerted labor action behind it to shift administrative policy. Who can any longer doubt the willingness of university administrations to break laws, flout precedents, and discipline and repress students and workers when Palestine is in the mix?

The Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions’ call for global action, including the explicit call to American unions, can be seen as building off the 2004 Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement. The urgency of watching genocide in Palestine unfold in real time, as well a generational shift among pro-Palestinian activists in the United States, has created new social bases for mobilization. As we enter a new academic year, it seems clear that the student movement will continue to demand an end to U.S. complicity. At the same time, the surge of labor organizing in higher education shows no sign of dissipating. The strides already taken in the union movement in higher education open possibilities unavailable to previous internationalist campus struggles, such as that against Apartheid in South Africa (Left in the Bay 2024). In this way, the student and worker movement has become *extremely* proximate on campus, sharing largely the same demands and facing identical administrative intransigence—a nexus of rare immediacy in the long historical interaction of student and worker struggles.

The recent strike at UC, then, contains glimpses of the possibilities of linking of aca-

demic workers in concerted action in solidarity with the Palestinian struggle, as well as with the student movement for a free Palestine, which must become a shared goal. It is also possible to imagine links in other sectors of the labor movement, where K-12 is only the most obvious example. The strike, however, also reveals limitations that will need to be overcome, of which the consolidation of senate faculty, precarious lecturers, and grad workers behind shared demands looms most urgently. Our experience at UCSC over the past half decade suggests that this is not a trivial problem, nor that an immediate fix is likely. While efforts at political education and statements and acts of support are important, our recent experience tells us that it does not produce strike readiness alone, especially across job titles. We consider that we have made our greatest progress in between the tides of strikes and mobilization, in spaces for deliberate reflection and strategizing before the next surge. Such discussion, although time consuming and apparently low-stakes when things are calm, has cultivated shared instincts and impulses among small groups of organizers whose coherence and sense of purpose can prove telling later on, when events are most intense. Both of us would be more than willing to meet with any colleagues or comrades on university campuses elsewhere. ♦

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