

Students stage occupation to protest California budget cuts

Marc Wells

20 October 2009

An intervention by police last Thursday put an end to the occupation of the Humanities and Social Sciences building at the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC) by students protesting the latest round of budget cuts and fee hikes in the University of California (UC) system.

This is the second occupation at UCSC in less than a month. On September 24, the day that thousands of students, faculty, and workers rallied throughout the state to oppose attacks on public higher education, a group of students occupied the Graduate Student Commons for a week.

According to the students' blog, the police responded aggressively to last Thursday's demonstration, which began as a potluck dinner in the building's courtyard:

"[Students] were maced and arrested by police. All the police said to the students was, 'Hey folks, let's go, this is vandalism,' after which they sprayed mace on them. At no point did the police warn the students that they were about to be sprayed, nor did they ever instruct the students to desist. The police failed to read students their Miranda rights at the time of cuffing but were dragged away to the police vehicle."

This and other protest actions recently held on UC campuses are in response to upwards of \$1.5 billion in cuts implemented by Republican Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and the Democrat-controlled state legislature over the course of the 2008-2010 academic years. These measures, undertaken with the support of the Obama administration, have resulted in massive fee hikes.

After an initial increase of 9.3 percent for the current academic year, UC President Mark G. Yudof recently proposed a further 32 percent rise in fees. The cost of attending a UC school has doubled since 1990, under conditions in which California has its highest unemployment rate in nearly 70 years. Many students are finding that they simply cannot afford to go to school.

Cuts are also affecting UC workers, with nearly 1,000 layoffs and 2,000 positions being eliminated in 2008-2009. Figures are slightly higher for 2009-2010. Hiring freezes

have affected many departments.

In the aftermath of the September 24 protests across the UC system, certain layers within the university establishment are making an effort to divert widespread anger into safe channels.

For example, a meeting held at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) on October 15 to address the budget crisis had a panel composed of professors and students. While the positions put forth by different individuals varied in their details, in sum the situation was blamed on bad fiscal policies. People were encouraged to contact their elected officials and to support laws changing how budgets are passed in the state. They were also counseled on the need for shared sacrifices.

The proposals advanced at the UCLA panel found a lukewarm reaction among attendees. Students and workers are looking for a solution that goes beyond these measures, all of which have one thing in common: the acceptance of the cuts in one form or another and the insistence that workers and students must pay the price of the current crisis.

The occupations by the UCSC students are a reaction to both the failing educational system and the toothless character of these solutions. However, the political perspective animating their actions is misguided.

The WSWWS interviewed one of the UCSC student occupiers who has also been involved in the public statements issued by the group.

"The UC budget crisis is symptomatic of a far wider pattern," he said, "a mode of capitalism that has gone into severe crisis and which demands this kind of intolerable decision-making on the part of its administrators."

Critical of Obama for leaving the states to bear the consequences of the present economic crisis without federal aid, he described the president as a man who "came into office as the shining hope of protecting capitalism."

Explaining that his group's call is "truly global," he argued, "The underlying causes producing the situation here are causes that threaten us all." The occupiers, he went on to say, "work from an anti-capitalist perspective toward a focus

on local conditions.”

The protesters, however, are vague about what is meant by an “anti-capitalist perspective.” Speaking with the WSWS, this student explained that they advocate “autonomous action and calls for mass mobilization toward shared objectives. This is to say: at the current moment, we do not think that a single organization would be capable of ‘facilitating’ or directing the escalation of struggles.”

Moreover, he continued, “Political strategies will differ, but we believe that through the tactical work of actions that will escalate by means of demonstrating new radical options and instilling a sense of urgency, the broader sense of shared strategy will emerge.”

That is, the organization of “actions,” such as the occupation at UCSC, will stimulate greater resistance and eventually lead to some “shared strategy.” The importance of political perspective and strategy—and therefore a political party—is dismissed as unnecessary and even harmful.

Such an outlook is rooted in a rejection of the need to build a political party of the working class, unified on the basis of shared understanding of the historical lessons of the workers’ movement. It leaves the door open to virtually any and all outlooks, regardless of where they ultimately lead, with the only arbiter being their commitment to “mass” action and certain left-sounding phrases.

The working class has a long experience with the dead end to which such an outlook leads. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, student groups espousing similar ideas proliferated on European and American campuses. One must only review the activities of the Italian *Lotta Continua* or *Potere Operaio* (led by Antonio Negri, co-author of *Empire* and *Multitude*), or the French *Socialisme ou Barbarie* of Cornelius Castoriadis (author of *The Imaginary Institution of Society*), or the German *Autonome*.

Explicitly rejecting the role of the working class, these organizations focused on protests by various petty-bourgeois and student layers. Negri’s *Potere Operaio*, to cite an example, resorted to acts of individual terrorism against leading figures of the political establishment and their families. The group dissolved in a few years.

To the question of why “socialism” is not mentioned in any of their statements, the interviewed student responded, “The relative absence of those references to socialism, communism, and anarchism is intentional. We feel that at this moment, such terms largely occlude the work to be done, work that needs to start with articulating plans of action and shared perspectives, not with parsing out the name on the banner under which we move.”

This approach rests upon a rejection of and hostility to history and theory. But without history or theory students and workers cannot develop a correct assessment of current

events, much less produce an accurate diagnosis of the present-day crisis or formulate a political strategy that will actually challenge the capitalist system.

The attempt to build an oppositional movement without working over the lessons of the 20th century—above all, the origins and degeneration of the Soviet Union—is bound to lead to disaster. Past mistakes will simply be repeated.

The International Students for Social Equality, the student and youth group of the Socialist Equality Party, held a rally last month at San Diego University and issued a statement that clearly explained the origins of the present crisis. Insisting on the necessity of building a socialist party of the working class, independent of the Democrats and Republicans, the ISSE wrote:

“The defense of public education cannot be carried out simply within the framework of protests on universities and college campuses. Students and faculty must turn to the working class as a whole.” The ISSE called for the formation of committees of struggle to unite students and faculty on university and college campuses with workers and youth throughout the state.

“The problems confronting [California] are only a concentrated expression of the failure of world capitalism,” it stated. “The alternative to capitalism is socialism—an egalitarian world society based on the rational and democratic development of the wealth of the planet in the interest of social need. This requires the nationalization of the banks and large corporations and their transformation into public utilities under the democratic control of the working class.”

The ISSE encourages students and workers who are looking for a way to oppose the attacks on education to contact us today and make the decision to join the ISSE and the Socialist Equality Party.

To contact the ISSE, click here.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact