

“They are taking away people’s rights”

Auto workers denounce police attack on California students

Jerry White
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The protests of the Occupy Wall Street movement have won widespread sympathy among workers throughout the US who have faced an unrelenting assault on their jobs, living standards and social programs.

The nationwide police crackdown against protesters, including last week’s pepper spray attack on students at the University of California, Davis, is largely aimed at intimidating and preventing a broader movement of the working class against social inequality.

The anti-Wall Street protests have, in particular, resonated widely among auto workers who were among the first to face brutal job and wage cuts after the economic collapse in 2008. The Obama administration’s restructuring of the auto industry has resulted in multi-billion dollar profits for the corporations and huge payouts to corporate executives and Wall Street.

Last week’s attack on the UC Davis students provoked widespread disgust and anger among auto workers. “It was wrong what the police did. I’m on the side of the college students,” said Bobby Dell, a worker who has lost his job at the NUMMI auto plant in Fremont, California last year when the plant closed. The factory, which employed 4,700 workers, was shuttered in April 2010 after General Motors pulled out of the joint venture with Toyota as part of the government restructuring.

“I saw the video. The police had no right to spray them. That gives you an idea of what is coming; they are moving towards a police state.

“You understand why the students are fighting. The government is cutting Medicare and school. They don’t want our kids educated. They are cutting welfare and

not doing anything to help unemployed people. It’s the one percent—like the protesters are saying—who control everything. I worked at NUMMI for 22 years and I saw it first hand. I still haven’t found a job.

“The Occupation protesters are bringing this issue to everybody’s attention—but it’s going to take more. The one percent is not going to give up their money. They are going to fight for it. The government is trying to reduce everyone down to the minimum. It’s wrong; everybody has the right to earn enough to live.”

Jennifer was laid off from GM’s Indianapolis metal stamping plant. The corporation shut the plant earlier this year after workers refused to take a 50 percent wage cut agreed to by the United Auto Workers union. She and her husband were forced to move to Ohio so he could work at another auto plant.

“Those students were fighting for the right to an education. They are talking about raising tuition by 81 percent in California. People can’t afford that. What kind of future are the young people going to have? Only an elite handful of the rich are going to go to college, like it was in the old days.

“Someone put the video of the students being pepper sprayed on my Facebook page. The kids weren’t being radical or tearing things up. Why did the police attack them? We used to have peaceful demonstrations in this county—now you can’t have that. They are taking away people’s rights.”

Jennifer continued, “These are very brave kids. They are doing what the working class should be doing. The students are just in school. They are risking everything for their futures.

“Five years ago workers should have starting striking and pushing back the government and Wall Street. But

the UAW and the other unions have worked to stop that.

“They are trying to turn the clock backwards the way the country was in the 1920s and 1930s when coal miners were living in shacks. America is going to be nothing but the rich and every one else living in slums, being unemployed and uneducated. The rich are doing the same thing in every country.”

Ricky has worked at Chrysler’s Warren Truck plant in suburban Detroit for 17 years. He is also a veteran of the Iraq War. “I saw that video and I said ‘Oh, my god, are you for real?’ Why would you spray these students with the whole world watching?”

“The government is totally hypocritical. They complain about human rights when other countries attack protesters, but they do it right here in America. People need to open up their eyes and see what is going on. We have to come up with a plan to fight this.

“The government is for the big corporations. Now Fiat, which owns Chrysler, is saying we are making too much money. It’s just going to be the rich and the poor.”

Katie is a young contract worker at a General Motors factory in Lake Orion, Michigan, just north of Detroit. She said, “People were talking about the attack on the students on the blog site I use. Usually the site just makes fun of stuff, but this time people were taking this seriously. They were posting complaints against the police, even one from a blogger in Germany.

“I feel like anytime you go on a strike or protest you have to anticipate police reaction or over-reaction. The cop that attacked the students, he acted like, ‘It’s no big deal, I’m just pepper spraying some kids.’ You know he won’t face any repercussions.”

Katie described her own conditions. “When I applied for the job they told me I would be making \$14 an hour. I quit a \$12 an hour job to take it. Then when I got to the orientation they said we would be making \$9 an hour.

“At this job it’s hands down capitalism. Matty Mouron own the company. He also owns the Ambassador Bridge to Canada. The UAW has been in negotiations with the company, LSI, since March. Four weeks ago we had a meeting with the higher-ups in the UAW and they said if there was no deal we were walking out. The deadline passed and nothing happened. The UAW doesn’t represent the people.

“I can understand why the students are protesting. My wages are so low I’ve been evicted from my apartment. I’m not in school now because they raised tuition. I’m angry and my situation isn’t the worst. People are losing homes; they’re coping with huge wage cuts.

“In the beginning I thought Obama was great. He said the economy should serve the people from the bottom up. Lots of people were saying, ‘Hey, that sounds a lot like the way I think.’ But Obama is bought off by the rich just like all the other politicians. They are cutting funding to schools and laying off firemen and other workers who actually do things that help.”

As these sentiments make clear, the conditions exist for forging the most powerful unity between young people and workers. To fight for this, students at UC Davis and other Occupy protesters cannot restrict their activity to the campuses and encampments but should turn to the working class—in the factories, offices and public services—in order to transform this sympathy into a political movement, independent of the two big business parties and armed with a program to put an end to social inequality forever.



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