

University of California, Davis “pepper spray incident” reports made public

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Last Wednesday, two groups tasked with the responsibility for investigating the “pepper spray incident” at the University of California, Davis issued their reports. The documents focus entirely on the smallest of details of the incident and completely avoid framing the situation as a clash between students protesting brutal austerity and the coercive arm of the state responding with violence.

The evidence revealed in the reports shows, however, that police and administrators did not hesitate to attack students and used unauthorized means of violence and a quasi-legal rationale to break apart the students’ tent encampment. The reports conclude by focusing on how UC administrators can prevent and control future protests so that they can avoid being embarrassed in the future.

Both investigative reports were made at the request of high-ranking UC Davis administrators and were produced by groups from a political and social layer that supports the wave of austerity that has struck California’s public services, including its schools and universities. Their primary purpose, therefore, is to relieve pressure that had been mounting on Chancellor Linda Katehi, Vice Chancellor Fred Wood, Police Chief Annette Spicuzza, Lt. John Pike, and other administration and police officials.

On November 18, Lt. Pike sprayed the faces of a dozen students as they sat protesting peacefully on the ground. The assault, which generated outrage internationally, came amidst a nationwide wave of police repression of the Occupy Wall Street encampments, and in California, the crackdown on student opposition to Democratic Governor Jerry Brown’s attacks on education. Police also beat peaceful student protesters with truncheons at UC Berkeley, and met demonstrators in Oakland with tear gas and rubber

bullets.

The day after the UC Davis incident occurred, an estimated 8,000 students and faculty gathered on the Quad in the largest protest in recent UC Davis history. Only hours later, hundreds of students formed a picket and successfully broke up a spin-doctored press event being held in a secret location by the administration. Tens of thousands had signed an online petition demanding the resignation of the Chancellor. Video of Katehi’s “walk of shame” past silent students circulated through the national press.

Kroll Inc., a New York firm headed by former LAPD Chief William Bratton, issued one report. Bratton’s past in leading unconstitutional mass arrest raids in South Central Los Angeles, criminalizing homelessness and poverty through his “Broken Windows” theory of policing, and in consulting the London Metropolitan Police in vicious crackdowns on rioters and their families in North London underscores the biased nature of this report.

Former California Supreme Court Justice and “progressive” Democrat Cruz Reynoso heads the 13-member task force which issued the second report. Both reports were relatively similar in character and failed even to demand the resignation of any administrator or police officer.

Though the reports call attention to the obvious fact that the use of pepper spray “does not appear to have been an objectively reasonable use of force” and criticizes Chancellor Katehi for failing to request that police not use violence against students, they blame the incident on the lack of police organization and call for UC Davis to develop stricter rules as to how to regulate campus protests. This most likely means that police and administrators will be forced to grow more clandestine with their operations, as they have done in the past. In

2010, it was discovered that administrators and police had established a secret network to infiltrate peaceful student demonstrations, which included the use of undercover police officers.

The reports mistakenly blames the police response on fear—a ridiculous assumption when one considers fully-armed police officers with guns, tasers, pepper spray, truncheons, helmets, bullet-proof vests, steel-toed boots, and vehicles facing off against several dozen students sitting on the grass.

Lt. Pike, the officer caught on video pepper-spraying students, is reported to have used MK-9 spray on the students. MK-9 is a high-pressure, high-intensity spray that UCDPD is not authorized and was not trained to use. The report criticized Pike and Police Chief Spicuzza for allowing the substance to be used at a distance “much closer” than the recommended 6 feet.

It is almost certain that no changes will come from the issuance of these findings, vindicating the perspective of the Socialist Equality Party and its youth organization, the International Students for Social Equality, which called not only for the immediate resignation of Chancellor Katehi and Chief Spicuzza, but for uniting students and workers against all forms of austerity. Only in this way can tuition hikes, budget cuts, and cuts to social services be reversed or prevented. (See the ISSE’s statement, “The police attack at UC Davis: The working class and the defense of democratic rights”)

As the various protest groups involved in the Occupy UC Davis protests have revealed, there is no use in pressuring the administration to change course. Chancellor Katehi was brought to UC Davis to oversee an era of privatization, and she has made it clear that she is not afraid to use violence to impose her reactionary agenda upon students and their families. Popular anger has not dissipated, but cynical calculations of the UC administration have proven correct as tensions have fallen to more manageable levels on campus.

In a statement issued last week, UC President Mark Yudof echoed the blatant hypocrisy of other UC administrators by proclaiming that “free speech, including nonviolent protest, is part of the DNA of this university, and it must be protected with vigilance. I implore students who wish to demonstrate to do so in a peaceful fashion, and I expect campus authorities to

honor that right.”

Though President Yudof has issued this tired “DNA of the university” statement on multiple occasions, including long before the pepper spray or the violent UC Berkeley incident, he and other administrators are more than satisfied that this report has allowed UC the time to carry out the damage control necessary to prevent the slowing of their regiment of austerity and privatization.



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