

As AFSCME drags out contract negotiations

Brutal police assault on UC Berkeley worker evokes anger

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The brutal police assault on David Cole—a 51-year-old housing and dining services employee—at the University of California at Berkeley has provoked widespread anger. The attack, caught on video and widely shared on social media, took place during a February 1 lunchtime protest organized by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Union (AFSCME).

Cole sustained head and eye injuries from the incident and had to be taken to Alameda County Medical Center before being arrested on suspicion of misdemeanor vandalism and willful obstruction of an officer. He was cited and released, and faces a March 1 arraignment at Oakland’s Wiley Manuel Courthouse.

The Berkeley protest was one of a number of rallies called by AFSCME, the bargaining agent for over 24,000 UC workers, including over 8,000 service workers and 13,000 patient care workers who are currently working without a contract. The actions were ostensibly called to press for an end to tuition hikes, higher wages, lower healthcare premiums and better working conditions. The union is currently involved in contract negotiations with UC that have reportedly reached an impasse.

The February 1 date for the protests was chosen to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the 1968 Memphis sanitation workers strike, which itself was a response to the deaths of two workers, Echol Cole and Robert Walker, killed when their truck’s compactor malfunctioned.

The rallies at each of the eight participating UC campuses drew minimal participation, with about 100 attendees at each location. Like the staged “near strike” in 2014, the lunchtime rallies amounted to little more

than a stunt aimed at dissipating worker anger.

The poor attendance did not reflect a lack of desire to fight on the part of workers, but the fact that workers have no confidence in AFSCME to wage a serious struggle after the experience of the sellout contract imposed on them in 2014. The March 2014 concessions contract pushed through by AFSCME was touted as a “victory” after the union canceled a strike voted on by 96 percent of its membership.

AFSCME is the largest union in the UC system and has the lowest paid-employees—custodians, food workers, gardeners and technicians. The union web site reports that “99 percent of service workers are currently income eligible for some form of public assistance with some full time UC workers even living in their cars.”

Organized during lunch hour, the UC-Berkeley event drew about 100 people. Initially a picket line, the rally spilled over into the streets and blocked the intersection of Bancroft Way and Telegraph Avenue for approximately 10 minutes. Eyewitnesses later stated that the situation escalated rapidly as drivers in some of the vehicles engaged in hostile exchanges with the protesters.

According to the University of California Police Department (UCPD) Cole threw a sign at a vehicle that was trying to make its way through the crowd.

Police allege that Cole then approached the driver, who got out of the vehicle, in a “threatening and aggressive manner.” Campus police claimed that due to his “non-cooperative” behavior when a UCPD officer attempted to detain him, Cole was tackled to the ground by a number of officers.

AFSCME spokesman John de los Angeles released statements that contradicted the police allegations. He

noted that the car had begun to “push through the crowd and make contact with the picketers, who were occupying the intersection,” according to protesters. Someone did throw something at the car, he noted, but Cole was still holding his sign.

The attack appears to have been carefully prepared by police, who had been organized en masse for the purpose of *targeting* workers at the rally should the union be unable to contain their anger.

For its part AFSCME has attempted to play down the incident, doing nothing to mobilize the campus workers and the broader working-class public to oppose the assault on Cole. In so far as AFSCME has taken note of the event, it has been to portray it in exclusively racial terms, not relating it to the fight of campus workers—black, white and immigrant—for decent pay and benefits. Almost immediately after the arrest, AFSCME posted on Facebook: “At a peaceful protest honoring the generations long struggle of black workers who risked everything to win dignity and fair treatment on the job, the University of California decided to engage in police tactics more befitting of the Jim Crow South. This is why we fight.”

Another AFSCME official stated, “This incident only underscores UC’s deplorable record and continued resistance on issues of racial justice. We will not rest until UC agrees to provide its workers with adequate protections for immigrants and people of color.”

As quoted in the *Daily Californian*, ASUC Senator Juniperangelica Cordova-Goff claimed that the police had singled Cole out as a black man, and that it was not hard to see that Cole’s arrest was “racially driven.” This was reiterated by Berkeley City Council Member Ben Bartlett: “On the first day of Black History Month, they target a Black man... Why him?”

The refusal of AFSCME to address the broader class issues raised by the police assault on Cole, much less mobilize workers in opposition to the attack, reflects the reactionary orientation of the union bureaucracy to the Democratic Party, which uses identity politics to divide and disorient the working class. In fact the same Democratic politicians who oversee the UC police, reaching all the way up to Democratic California Governor Jerry Brown, have been responsible for an endless wave of budget cuts that have decimated the jobs and living standards of UC workers.

This incident underscores the necessity of UC

workers mobilizing independently from AFSCME in order to wage a genuine struggle in opposition to poverty-level wages, meager benefits and attacks on democratic rights. This requires a break with the unions and the creation of rank-and-file workplace committees.



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