Academic workers speak out on the University of California picket line: “We should be pushing for a general strike”

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On Saturday at 4:00 p.m. US Eastern Time, 1:00 p.m. Pacific Time, the World Socialist Web Site *and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) are holding a public meeting, “Mobilize the working class to defend the University of California strike against genocide!” Register for the event here.*

The strike by 2,000 academic workers at the University of California, Santa Cruz against the crackdown on Gaza protests continues through Wednesday amidst the threat of an injunction to ban the action. While the United Auto Workers has only called out one out of 10 UC campuses, 48,000 members across the entire system voted overwhelmingly last week to strike.

After filing for an injunction Tuesday, the university administration claimed that the strike is illegal because its “goal is to pressure the University to concede to a list of politically motivated demands closely linked to the protests occurring across California and the nation.” This sweeping argument would set a precedent banning strike action across the United States. A ruling is expected by the end of the week.

The situation urgently requires that the strike be expanded, first to the entire UC system and then to the entire UAW membership. Autoworkers in particular must mobilize to defend the strike.

The UC strike must also link up with the strike at Western Washington University, where 1,100 academic workers walked out on Tuesday, also part of the UAW and facing impossible living conditions as their university continues to seek to further exploit them.

This requires the rank-and-file take control of the strike into their own hands. The fate of the strike cannot be left to the capitalist courts, or in the pro-corporate UAW bureaucracy, which supports “Genocide Joe” Biden. The union bureaucrats are trying to sabotage the strike by limiting it to one campus and are eager to reach a deal to shut it down, which would amount to a *de facto* injunction.

There is widespread support for expanding the strike, in spite of attempts by the UAW bureaucracy to isolate it. Steve, a young autoworker at the Stellantis Warren Truck plant, told the WSWS, “We have not heard much about the University of California strike, but I support everyone who is fighting to defend their Constitutional Rights, including free speech. What is happening in Gaza is wrong, with so many people and children being killed.

“The Palestinian people have the right to fight back. They were kicked out of their land and have been marginalized for so long. My grandmother used to say, ‘Hurt people, hurt people.’ The indigenous people in America had a right to fight back, and so do the Palestinians. The media labels those who are opposed to the US agenda as bad people. Biden and the Democrats try to put veils over our eyes—to keep us from seeing what is going on.”

There is enormous potential to link up the strike against the genocide with growing fight against low wages and exploitation. At UC Irvine in southern California, workers in AFSCME Local 3299 held informational pickets Wednesday next to a pro-Palestine rally. These workers are part of the 33,000 service and patient care technical workers at UC's campuses and medical centers. But the union bureaucrats are desperately trying to keep these struggles divided.

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At UC Irvine, students and academics are furious over the police assault last week on an encampment, which took place as the UAW strike vote ended. There are widespread demands that UC Irvine go out on strike as well.

One Santa Cruz student told the WSWS the goal should be “Getting as many people into this movement and tearing down the lines between a strike and a protest. At the end of the day we’re all here protesting for Palestine. We’re all political protesters who share a common goal, which is the end of this genocide and a free Palestine.

“There’s not really one way to achieve that. Divestment is a big goal of the student movement, but I’ve been questioning myself a lot, is divestment enough? And by the time we reach divestment, does it even matter? I think there’s a split between the urgency of now and the desire to stick to a long term plan for divestment. It’s a big divide in this movement.

“I view this institution [the University of California system] as part of the war machine and I feel it’s our obligation to shut any part of the war machine down.”

Referring to a sign on the picket line calling for a general strike, the student added, “I think if we make it happen, it could [be done].” They added, “[We have to] to reach out to all these other people who are not within the campus community. Because we alone cannot shut everything down, right?

“And we need to be inviting more and more people into this movement. So I agree that this is where it should be headed. We should be pushing for a general strike. But I also don’t see a lot of people doing that, or at least, a lot of people in leadership positions doing that.

“I think a lot of leadership is washing their hands of the situation, as in ‘I did my part.’ So I think it’s up to rank and file and individual undergrads and us working in our groups to reach out and connect with other groups. And that’s what I’m trying to do here.”

Another Santa Cruz student said, “There’s this narrative of ‘vote blue, no matter who,’ but when you look at a president that is enabling a genocide, it’s very hard to justify voting for him.

“I think everybody who is here, at the very least, is very disillusioned by the election. I don’t think anyone here is particularly thrilled at our prospects in any capacity.”

A research student said, “Hopefully, this is the first step towards a more internationalist movement. It’s important that we are getting to this moment in which workers across the world are sympathizing with people who they have never met, who they have never seen their culture, who aren’t familiar with them in many ways, yet, rather than seeing them as an alien population, they are looking at them as people who they have something in common with, which is, their humanity.

“The fact that workers are able to see the fundamental humanity of each other at this moment is a really important step. And my biggest hope is that we continue having this sort of international movement in which we are taking a stand for each other, and in which we are recognizing the fundamental humanity of those that our rulers would ultimately have us back the murder of.”

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