

“We should have freedom of speech at all costs”: Support builds among Detroit autoworkers for University of California anti-genocide strike

Our reporters

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On Saturday at 4 p.m. US eastern time, the World Socialist Web Site and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees are holding an online public meeting, “Mobilize the working class to defend the University of California strike against genocide!” Register for the event here.

Support is growing among autoworkers in Detroit, Michigan for the University of California academic workers’ strike against the police crackdown on Gaza protests. Around 2,000 workers at UC Santa Cruz have been on strike since Monday, with workers at UCLA and UC Davis set to join them on Tuesday. Both UC and Detroit workers are members of the United Auto Workers.

“I have two words for what is going on at campuses across the country: ‘Kent State,’” one Ford worker said. “Students opposing these wars are being beaten and arrested. I agree with the UC strike and we should support them.”

The strike is significant because it points to the need for the working class to emerge as the basic force against war and in defense of democratic rights. However, they are up against not only ruthless pro-war politicians and campus administrators but the United Auto Workers bureaucracy.

The UAW has called out only a fraction of the 48,000 UC workers statewide who authorized strike action. This has sparked enormous outrage among the rank-and-file; that UCLA and UC Davis have been called out is because workers were prepared to walk with or without official union sanction.

The university has “over \$3 billion invested in the

war economy,” one UC Santa Cruz striker told the WSWS. “They fund many on-campus labs, like Jack Baskin Engineering, and even astrophysics, biology. All of them have some sort of ties to either the DOD or even directly to the Israeli military.

“It’s insidious that they get students to work on something and then they tell them, ‘oh by the way, this is going to be used for war’. For example there’s this lab trying to figure out how to use robots to navigate areas for environmental purposes, rescue missions. But that technology is utilized for war.”

The so-called “standup strike” tactic of keeping most workers on the job is patterned after the limited strike last year in the auto industry. The UAW has claimed this produced an “historic victory,” but in fact thousands of workers have already lost their jobs under the new contract. Meanwhile, the bureaucracy has the closest ties with “Genocide Joe” Biden, endorsing his re-election and throwing out anti-war protesters during his acceptance speech earlier this year.

There is enormous support for a joint struggle combining the fight against layoffs with the defense of antiwar protests. But, as socialist autoworker Will Lehman recently explained, “this requires we take the initiative and not wait for the bureaucrats to act for us ... We have to develop the rank-and-file structures that give us real power to enforce our will and countermand the bureaucracy’s betrayals.

On Friday afternoon, Stellantis and Ford workers spoke to Jerry White, the Socialist Equality Party’s candidate for US vice president. “They gotta do what they gotta do,” one worker at Stellantis’ Warren Truck

plant said. “I respect that.”

“It’s wrong,” another worker said. “We should have freedom of speech at all costs. So therefore my heart goes out to you guys.”

“Let’s help them,” one worker said. “We can’t forget about the less fortunate. We’re all one.”

White also issued a statement Friday morning in support of the students. “I emphatically condemn the attack on the University of California students and academic workers,” he said. “It is urgent that all ... academic workers at the University of California immediately spread their strike to all 10 campuses, and that all UAW members in the auto plants and elsewhere prepare mass strike action to defend the rights of the students and the academic workers.”

“From the Biden administration to the Democrats and Republicans, they are overseeing this attack ... and this assault is taking place all over the world,” he continued. “But from the very beginning the UAW apparatus, which is aligned with the Biden administration, has done everything they could to isolate the UC strikers and limit the struggle.”

UC Irvine students speak

Earlier, the WSWS spoke with students and alumni at UC Irvine, where police violently attacked an encampment the previous week.

Allison, a biology major, said “I find it very interesting that they’re passing a lot of new laws that are limiting freedom of speech. They’re definitely villainizing the protesters, basically demonizing them. It’s easier to silence people than you’re villainizing. It’s like, ‘oh, you know, these students are terrorists.’ It’s easier to be like, ‘okay, I see why the police brutalized them.’”

Kai, a chemistry major, said, “It’s a similar thing that I think they’re trying to pick at small things, trying to blow the strike out of proportion, as if we are some kind of force that’s trying to take down the school. We’re trying to voice our concern. There’s nothing wrong with that. And yeah, sure, we’re getting louder. War is going on. But that’s just it shows how strongly we believe this. We’re not here to cause violence.

We’re here to shut it down.”

Ariana is an alumnus of UCI, where she majored in public health. She described how her younger sister, an undergrad, was arrested in the police attack on the protesters on May 15. “She was arrested along with about 23 other students. Her arrest was particularly wrong. The police ripped off her hijab and pulled her to the ground. As a Muslim woman, she was wearing her hijab to cover her hair. When the cops pulled her, they basically ripped it off to where all the news outlets caught her on camera without her hijab, with her hair showing. She was repeatedly yelling to the cops, ‘Please give me my hijab.’

“So she got an email yesterday basically indicating that she’s not allowed to participate on campus, any activities, she’s not allowed to be here. It’s still kind of fresh, and we’re still trying to figure out the next steps to take. She’s not allowed on campus at all...Right now it’s like a legal battle. We’re just hoping it never happens again. I’m here to show support for her, and I hope that the school drops all suspensions.”

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