

The lessons of the University of California strike and the way forward to stop war and state repression

Bryan Dyne, Jerry White, Tom Hall
20 June 2024

It has been two weeks since the strike by tens of thousands of academic workers at the University of California was shut down by a court injunction, dutifully obeyed by the United Auto Workers bureaucracy. Grad students, teaching assistants, researchers and other academic workers began their strike on May 20 to oppose the US-backed genocide in Gaza and police crackdown on campus protests across the country.

The strike was a major strategic experience. It was not initiated by the UAW bureaucracy but by rank-and-file academic workers who were striving to connect the fight against the economic insecurity confronting an entire generation of young workers with the struggle against imperialist war.

The United Auto Workers under union president Shawn Fain repeatedly delayed calling the strike, despite the overwhelming vote for such action after academic workers and students at UCLA were attacked by Zionist thugs and police. When the union finally called the strike, the union apparatus limited it to only 2,000 workers and at only one of the UC system's 10 campuses.

The UAW was only forced to expand the walkout to six of the 10 campuses and 30,000 out of the 48,000 UC workers because of the threats by rank-and-file workers that they would conduct wildcat strikes in defiance of the UAW apparatus.

The terror in the ruling class that it could spread, accounts for the ruthless pseudo-legal measures used to end the strike. The UC administration's argument that the strike was "illegal" because of its political aims amounts to a declaration that the working class must be politically disfranchised under the domination of the two pro-war parties. Meanwhile, police continued to attack protest encampments across the country, including UC Santa Cruz and at Wayne State University.

The significance of the strike, and the police-state measures used to end it, are that they anticipate an even broader and more explosive confrontation between the working class, which is being forced to pay for the cost of war, and American and world imperialism.

After months of global demonstrations against the genocide that the Zionist regime and capitalist governments around the world ignored, the UC strike signaled in embryonic form the entry of the working class into the struggle against war.

The genocide in Gaza is only one front in an expanding Third World War. The United States and the European powers are trying

to offset their decline through reconquering former colonies and destroying their strategic rivals, especially Russia and China.

As the strike itself took place, the Biden administration began arming its Ukrainian proxy forces with weapons capable of striking Russian cities, raising the danger of nuclear war. The White House also slapped unprecedented tariffs on Chinese exports, as part of preparations for a war with China. Meanwhile, the genocide has continued with the full support of the United States, which continues to provide weapons to the Israeli military.

The attack on free speech has expanded globally. Police have attacked anti-genocide protests across Europe, including at Humboldt University in Berlin, only a short distance away from where the Nazis burned books in the 1930s. The German secret police have also designated the International Youth and Students for Social Equality as a "left-wing extremist group" as the IYSSE made major gains in the student parliament elections at Humboldt.

NATO's client regime in Ukraine has also arrested anti-war socialist Bogdan Syrotiuk for his association with the *World Socialist Web Site*, and banned the WSWS on the absurd and false grounds that it is a pro-Russian propaganda outlet.

The whole of society is being placed on a war footing. Campuses are being converted from centers of scholarship and debate into propaganda centers controlled by the military-intelligence apparatus and Wall Street. The University of California system, which has more than \$30 billion invested in the American war machine and in Zionism, is a central pillar of this transformation.

The UAW bureaucracy attempted to divert the attention of strikers into demands for divestment by individual universities. They promoted the lie that academic workers could settle accounts with imperialism through collective bargaining and bilateral talks with campus administrators. To be blunt, this is akin to arguing that the Holocaust could have been stopped by negotiations with German universities to divest from the Nazi regime.

The UAW apparatus has promoted divestment and appeals to the Public Employment Relations Board (PERB) precisely because it does not threaten either imperialism or the Democratic Party. In reality, workers are in a fight against the capitalist state. The repeated attacks on UC students have been coordinated by the entire Democratic Party, including the UC Board of Regents, Governor Gavin Newsom, Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass as well as US President "Genocide Joe" Biden.

The Biden administration has overseen a nationwide and bipartisan campaign to smash campus protests, which have led to the arrests of more than 3,000 people, the vast majority students and academic workers.

Both Democrats and Republicans have promoted the big lie that the anti-genocide demonstrations are “antisemitic” even though large numbers of protesters are Jewish youth who oppose the crimes of the Zionist regime. They have threatened universities with a cut-off of federal funding if they are not sufficiently aggressive against protesters, and have called for sanctions and the deportation of foreign students for taking part in the protests.

Aiding the Democrats have been the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), the Party of Socialism & Liberation and other middle class pseudo-left organizations. These groups sought deliberately to downplay the role of the Biden administration, the Democratic Party and the UAW bureaucracy—which is largely controlled by the pseudo-left through the ruling Unite All Workers for Democracy faction.

The role of the union bureaucracy is to try to strangle the class struggle in order to prepare the home front for war. While it pretended to be organizing a fight against the genocide, its real policies were on display at the start of the year when it endorsed “Genocide Joe’s” re-election and threw anti-genocide protesters out of the hall where Biden gave his acceptance speech.

The UAW’s efforts at sabotaging the strike were a key element in the government’s response. There can be little doubt that top UAW officials were in contact with the White House every step of the way during the strike.

The Biden administration is pursuing a policy of corporatism, that is, the drawing together of the state with the major corporations and the union bureaucracy in the name of prosecuting the “national interest.” As part of this, the White House has worked with the bureaucracy to sell out or block one strike after another in key industries, including oil and gas, the docks, at UPS and logistics and, infamously, the railroads, where Biden and Congress pre-emptively banned a national strike .

The UAW modeled the strike at UC after the so-called “standup strike” in the auto industry last year. This was a limited, toothless strike which paved the way for mass layoffs, which the union deliberately concealed from workers. When it called off that strike, the union celebrated with a rally where Biden appeared, opposite thousands of anti-genocide protesters.

Fearing that the militant strike could inspire similar actions on campuses and factories across the country, the UAW bureaucracy also imposed an information blackout about the UC struggle. The only way rank-and-file autoworkers in Detroit and other industrial cities learned about the UC strike was through the activities of the *World Socialist Web Site* and its *Autoworker Newsletter*. But once the information blackout was pierced, the strike began generated significant support among autoworkers.

This is why the UAW immediately capitulated to the court injunction, declaring that nothing could be done against the decisions of the capitalist courts. They welcomed the injunction as an excuse to shut it down.

But every historic victory of the working class has taken place in opposition to the “government by injunction” and attempts to

illegalize the class struggle. Meanwhile, the hysterical response to proceedings in the International Criminal Court against leading Israeli politicians shows the ruling class refuses to accept any legal restraint to its own activities.

The corporatist alliance between the White House and the bureaucracy only grew during the strike. UAW President Fain has been appointed to the White House Export Council alongside corporate CEOs, where he is helping organize trade war against China.

But this strategy is being threatened by the enormous hatred for the bureaucracy by the rank-and-file after repeated sellouts. This has produced a crisis within the bureaucracy itself, in the form of mutual recriminations between Fain and other top officials and the sudden refusal to continue cooperating with a court-appointed monitor installed after a massive corruption scandal which had sent more than a dozen top officials to prison.

The chief lesson of the University of California strike is that the working class must become the basic force against war. This requires a fight against the pro-capitalist, pro-war political system and the trade union bureaucracy which defends it. To organize this struggle means the development of new structures, rank-and-file committees, which unite workers across different industries in a common fight against management, pro-corporate politicians and the saboteurs in the union bureaucracy.

Throughout the strike, the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party campaigned to broaden the strike into a movement of the entire working class. The WSWS addressed online meetings with hundreds of attendees from industries across the world, and sought to give voice through its coverage to the deep opposition of rank-and-file academic workers to the war and to the union bureaucracy’s conduct of the strike.

When the UC administration went to court to ban the strike, the WSWS warned that this was an attack on the democratic rights of the entire working class and urged workers to take action in defense of the students.

As the WSWS has explained, by virtue of its class interests and strategic role as the producer of society’s wealth, the global working class is uniquely positioned, if organized and armed with a correct political perspective, to halt the production and distribution of military equipment and put an end to imperialism and war.

But the importance of the working class for the fight against war is not just that it would increase the power of the movement by giving it the ability to shut down production. Rather, the struggle of the working class against capitalism is at the very center of the fight against war because war itself is a product of the crisis and breakdown of capitalism. This means the only viable strategy against the war is one based on a struggle to end capitalism and for the socialist reconstruction of society.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact