

Investigation exposes militarization of California campuses

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An investigation by CalMatters into all 148 public college and university campuses in California confirms what students and faculty have long experienced: campus police departments have become paramilitary forces, stockpiling combat-grade weaponry without even the most minimal democratic oversight. CalMatters is a nonprofit, nonpartisan news organization based in Sacramento. Its findings expose not only the militarization of higher education, but also the political forces that have enabled it, including the Democratic Party and its allies in the trade union bureaucracy and the pseudo-left.

The investigation found that police departments across the University of California (UC), California State University (CSU), and California Community Colleges (CCC) systems possess large arsenals of AR-15-style rifles and submachineguns, tens of thousands of rounds of specialized ammunition, tear gas grenades, distraction devices, surveillance drones and Long Range Acoustic Devices (LRADs) capable of causing permanent hearing damage. UC Berkeley alone possesses 24 patrol rifles, 19 projectile launchers, 5,000 rounds of ammunition and an LRAD. UCLA deployed its LRADs 71 times during the 2024-25 academic year. San Jose State University stored 33 tear gas grenades and an HK MP5 submachinegun in violation of CSU policy.

These arsenals were supposedly regulated by Assembly Bill 481, signed by Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom in 2021. Presented as a landmark transparency measure, AB 481 requires campus police to obtain governing board approval for military equipment, publish annual inventories and use policies and hold public forums. The CalMatters investigation documents systemic noncompliance.

UC Berkeley withheld its inventory until seven

months after the UC Board of Regents approved it and only after repeated media inquiries. Cal Poly Humboldt and Sonoma State failed to hold required public forums in 2025. The CSU Board of Trustees has not publicly reviewed its military equipment policy since 2022. More than 40 community colleges failed to produce military equipment reports, while the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office admitted it does not track district compliance.

Campus police have also exploited legal loopholes to conceal their combat capabilities. To exempt themselves from public disclosure, the California State University system and San Francisco State administrators claimed their AR-15 patrol rifles were merely "standard issue," a designation that was contradicted by San Jose State's campus report, which classified the same style of semi-automatic rifle as a "specialized firearm."

Even more revealing is the strategic deployment of "mutual aid." When the UC administration moved to dismantle pro-Palestinian encampments at UCLA in May 2024, it called in the California Highway Patrol (CHP). Because state agencies are exempt from AB 481's campus-level oversight requirements, CHP officers deployed flashbangs, chemical agents and rubber bullets, while the university formally maintained policies restricting those very weapons. Militarized repression was outsourced and laundered by means of a jurisdictional loophole.

These developments reflect a broader political process driven by the deepening crisis of American capitalism. California, celebrated by Democrats as a progressive model, combines extraordinary wealth concentration with deepening social misery.

The state faces a projected \$2.9 billion budget deficit, while public universities confront more than \$1.5

billion in combined shortfalls. The CSU system alone faces a \$1 billion funding gap, resulting in lecturer layoffs, course reductions and tuition increases.

Amid the social crisis, the ruling class has expanded the repressive apparatus of the state. The Trump administration has escalated attacks on democratic rights through the deployment of federal forces against urban populations.

In California, where the political establishment presents itself as Trump's principal opponent, the Democratic Party has overseen the militarization of campus policing under Democratic governors, Democratic-appointed regents and a Democratic legislature. AB 481 was designed to regulate and legitimize the campus security apparatus, not dismantle it.

Newsom has expanded state repression by deploying the CHP for "crime suppression" operations and homeless encampment clearances, while portraying himself as Trump's opponent. Eighteen of the 19 UC Regents who approved another round of military equipment purchases in September 2024 were appointed by Newsom or former Governor Jerry Brown. When students protested that meeting, Regent Jay Sures called in riot police, declared an "unlawful assembly," cleared the room, and then approved every weapons request.

No analysis of this process is complete without examining the role of the trade unions, the Democratic Party's principal organizational base and its most effective mechanism for containing working class opposition. Unions such as the California Faculty Association and student worker organizations have formally demanded the disarmament or abolition of campus police. But they have refused to fight for these demands.

During the 2022 UC academic workers strike, rank-and-file caucuses demanded the abolition of the University of California Police Department and the transfer of police funding to community services. Union officials instead engaged in what organizers described as "backdoor bargaining," abandoning disarmament demands along with cost-of-living adjustments in exchange for limited wage increases. In 2024, the UAW bureaucracy called off a strike of 48,000 UC academic workers that had been explicitly directed against police attacks on Gaza solidarity

encampments.

Equally significant is the silence of major public sector unions, including the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the California Teachers Association and the California Federation of Teachers. These organizations represent millions of workers and remain among the largest financial supporters of the Democratic politicians who enacted AB 481, appoint the regents and oversee the continued expansion of campus militarization.

This arrangement would be politically unsustainable without the pseudo-left organizations that provide "left" cover for the Democrats and the union bureaucracy. The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and its unofficial organ *Jacobin* magazine published thousands of words on campus repression following the Gaza solidarity protests, without mentioning a single Democratic politician, despite the fact that the most violent police crackdowns occurred under Democratic governors and Democratic-appointed university administrations.

The weapons stockpiled on California campuses are used against peaceful student demonstrations, labor pickets and political protests. During the 2019-2020 wildcat strike at UC Santa Cruz, campus police worked with the California National Guard to deploy military surveillance equipment against graduate student pickets.

Historical records and public disclosures confirm that campus police departments systematically monitor labor organizing, including questioning service workers and compiling detailed intelligence reports for university labor relations and human resources officials to facilitate operational continuity during strikes.



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