



ANTIWORKING CONDITIONS

Strike Means Fuck the Police



Anti-police graffiti on the UCOP building, including: "Fuck the UC", "F12", and "ACAB"

Typeset in **BEBAS NEUE**, **Epilogue**, and Adobe Caslon Pro

Cover: Rioting breaks out on May 30, 2020 in Los Angeles, after the murder of George Floyd and the uprising in Minneapolis. The image shows an LAPD vehicle on fire and a riot cop in the foreground.

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It has been a week of concessions.¹ After the UAW2865 bargaining team made a series of preemptive capitulations in order to appear “reasonable,” the UC responded by presenting a historically bad offer, including wages so low they may even represent a pay cut at some campuses. The outrage on the part of the rank and file was immediate and energetic, with groups on each campus and across the state gearing up for a “no” vote on what promises to be a catastrophically bad contract. With so much of the focus on wages and cost of living, however, other issues have been pushed to the wayside. Most notably, the question of campus policing – a symbolic demand never actually taken seriously by union leadership – has virtually disappeared from the conversation among all but the most ‘militant’ rank and file.

There is no question that the union leadership is actively hostile to the prospect of defunding campus police. On campus after campus we hear reports of yellow-vested UAW strike captains telling Black workers that chanting “cops off campus” is too divisive (UCLA), giving campus police a schedule of all their supposedly radical actions and allowing police to lead marches and facilitate “shutting down” a traffic circle (UCI), and rerouting their entire day’s planned activities to avoid being seen near a Cops Off Campus table (UCD). In the struggle against the police, it is clear what side the UAW is on; meanwhile, the self-appointed leaders of the rank and file have largely declined to take a side in favor of a more ‘realistic’ and ‘inclusive’ strategy. The extent to which the demands around policing has been ignored by the mainstream rank and file was nowhere more evident than in the Meeting on Bargaining Developments on December 3. Hosted by the dissenting members of the bargaining team, this meeting was meant to inform members about the recent concessions and strategize for a potential no vote. However, when participants tried to bring up policing as a core workplace issue, they were repeatedly shut down, ignored, or treated as a distraction from those ostensibly universal, ‘real issues.’²

Against the outright hostility of the union and the telling silence of the rank and file, we argue that **policing is a fundamental workplace issue**. This is true in the simplest sense: the presence of police on (and off) campus is a threat to the safety of racialized students, workers, and community members. The police are white-supremacist violence personified; their very presence makes any workplace a hostile work environment. As one recent communicate from UCLA put it: “What’s a wage increase when Black students are 19 times more likely to be stopped and harassed by UCPD? There is no ‘fair contract’ without Disability Justice and Cops off Campus. We want a COLA but there is no ‘Cost of Living Adjustment’ if people’s basic

1 This was originally published on Monday, December 5, 2022, following a week of controversial bargaining concessions on the part of the UAW.

2 UC Equity (<https://www.ucequity.org>) provides another example of this type of erasure. Despite their strong support for disability justice (another matter often ignored in conversations about the strike), at the time this essay was written their site made no mention of either race or policing, glaring oversights from a group claiming to fight for “equity.”

personhood is not recognized.”³ Perhaps some picketers realize this when they yell, “Cops off campus / COLA in my bank account”—thus suturing these two demands in a single chant, even as the bargaining team does the same by effectively dropping them both from the bargaining table. Graduate workers are not an undifferentiated, unified group, and neglecting the real differences in people’s experiences only reproduces the conditions that create and maintain that differentiation.

But we would take this one step further. **Police are not only a workplace condition, they are a necessary condition for the existence of the workplace itself.** Police exist to enforce the capital labor relation. Where the silent compulsions of economics are insufficient to maintain that relation, the police step in to do so by force. This function of policing is maybe most evident when the cops are called in to break strikes or protests, forcing workers back to work and ensuring the smooth circulation of capital; we have not forgotten the \$300,000 per day spent to police the COLA strikes at UC Santa Cruz.⁴ But the police’s role as the guardians of capital manifests in nearly everything they do. They exist to protect private property and thus maintain the dispossession that defines the proletarian condition and forces proles to work for a wage in order to live. And perhaps most importantly, they discipline those racialized and gendered populations who are expelled from the workforce and whose exclusion constitutes the world of work: the lumpen and the surplus. **Just as campus police separate the borders of campus from its outsides, so does policing delineate the workplace and uphold it.**

In “Re-emergence and Eclipse of the Proletariat,” the authors argue that unions take part in this process of racialized exclusion by constructing a virtuous workers movement in opposition to ‘criminality,’ disorganization, and unproductivity.⁵ This tendency is clear in the UAW leadership’s attempts to police its own members and to dismiss any militant actions as the result of ‘outside agitators’ set on ‘hijacking’ a peaceful movement. When a group of autonomous UCSB students took over a dining commons, UAW yellow-vesters beat high-level administrators and UCPD (who did not show up) to arrive first on the scene, if only to investigate this “contingent of troublemakers” and clarify that the liberation was not a union-sanctioned activity. As evidenced by the internal communications of union bureaucrats,

3 COLA4ALL Newsletter, Nov. 29. <https://twitter.com/uclaranf/status/1597630389710860288>

4 Gurley, “California Police Used Military Surveillance Tech at Grad Student Strike,” Vice, May 15, 2020, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/7kppna/california-police-used-military-surveillance-tech-at-grad-student-strike>. UCPD’s response to the Occupy protests is also instructive. UCPD officers brutalized Occupy protesters at UC Berkeley in 2011, and then a few days later pepper-sprayed protesters at UC Davis. See Asimov and Berton, “UC campus police move in on student protesters,” SFGate, Nov. 9, 2011, <https://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/UC-campus-police-move-in-on-student-protesters-2323667.php>;

5 disaffected communists, “Re-emergence and Eclipse of the Proletariat.” <https://cryptpad.fr/file/#/2/file/ZCjeDTN67HEQI0i87Z9c9Y6W/>

'Cops off Campus' exists as a boogeyman-like phantasmagoria that threatens to undermine the legitimacy and legality of respectable strike actions. But can we not also see this same tendency in a rank and file movement that is more focused on winning over scabs and moderates than it is in listening to their BIPOC coworkers and opposing the police? Or when dissenting members of the bargaining team valorize withholding grading labor as the only effective means of struggle and explicitly reject occupations, blockades, sabotage, and other forms of escalation?

The limits we name here are not merely the result of bad representation or the vagaries of union elections, but are part and parcel of the labor movement itself. Unions as institutions exist to mediate the capital labor relation - their existence assumes and depends on the continuation of that relation rather than its disruption. It is only by recognizing this limit that we can fully grasp the kernel of truth hidden within the claim that struggles against policing are somehow opposed to struggles over wages or working conditions. For, **if the police are the enforcers of the capital labor relation, then their demise must also necessarily be the demise of that relation.** It is only where strikes spill over their boundaries, when they expand from a limited contest over wages to a struggle over the conditions of living, from a workplace dispute to a disruption of the workplace and of work itself, that they push beyond their own limits and become part of the real movement that abolishes the present state of things.

