



The Clarity of Denial and the Denial of Clarity

some malcontents

Typset in **Luminari**, *Origins smooth*, and Adobe Caslon Pro,

Cover: 'Sisyphus,' photograph by Jeffrey Hummel. A highly contrasted image of Sisyphus, cursed to push a boulder up a hill for eternity.

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The strike has ended, if not as we hoped, then as we expected. Grad students are generally a tepid bunch, and the desire to “get back to work” and continue their oh-so important research and career progress won the day, aided in part by a tiered system that gave further incentive for a yes vote on the most prestigious campuses. However, the fact that three campuses (Merced, Santa Barbara, and Santa Cruz) rejected the contract by wide margins suggests that any peace won by this contract will be a tenuous one at best. If history is any indication, further wildcats and other disruptions are not far off. When people’s needs aren’t met, they will struggle however they can.

With unrest in the air, distrust of the union at the highest levels in recent memory, and the threat of a wildcat in the future, it is telling that our self-declared leaders in Santa Cruz have chosen this moment to recommit to the UAW.¹ It is time, they claim, to “redouble our efforts.” Anything less will lead to a “phase of demobilization and inactivity.” And while they explicitly name dual-carding or trying to disaffiliate the union from the UAW as the primary targets of their scorn, they also include individuals revoking their union membership as examples of this tendency toward inaction. In doing so, they conflate action with union membership, struggle with internal union politics. This, along with their insistence on continued “rank and file” organizing and their assertion that our power comes “fundamentally from [our] capacity to withhold labor” rather than other forms of struggle makes it clear what they mean: union organizing is the only real politics, so leaving the union is tantamount to giving up.

In this we hear echoes of both electoralism (Vote harder! We can push them left!) and the administrative caucus of the union (We can strike again in a couple years!) all wrapped in the veneer of ‘militant’ worker power.

To suggest that leaving the union is that same as “inactivity” betrays how narrow their definition of “action” really is. How many times can they say that power comes *only* from withholding labor before we realize that they can truly see nothing else? Despite publishing newsletters and statements on every motion of the bargaining team, they never mentioned the many autonomous actions that took place during the strike - most notably, they refused to even acknowledge the dining hall takeovers that occurred on their own campus along with four others. There is an entire subterranean world of refusal, expropriation, and fugitivity bubbling below the surface, yet to the union organizer this world does not exist except as potential material for the next membership drive. Barricades, blockades, occupations, dining hall takeovers - none of this matters. The only struggles that count are those that can be quantified, fit into department organizing spreadsheets, and given instruction from on high.

1 “UAW Santa Cruz Statement on 12/23 Contract Ratification.” https://drive.google.com/file/d/14phR414oseH16dbPQ72DbceFei2nlh_K/view

It is worth remembering here that our self-declared “UCSC Leadership” are in actual fact *leadership*. This most recent statement comes from “UAW Santa Cruz,” and the @UCSC4COLA account has published other statements from elected members of the union, including the so-called dissident members of the bargaining team, bargaining team alternates, and head stewards. They are the UAW’s loyal opposition, the minority party, waiting until the electoral tides shift and they can take the helm. It is after all their mandate to demonstrate that they can discipline worker unrest and, ultimately, to end the strike. It should come as no surprise that people who have built their political / organizing careers in the union might take issue with anything that undermines its power.

However, we insist that the problem is not with union leadership alone, but with an entire political orientation. As others have detailed,² the UCSC leaders and many other mouthpieces of the “rank and file”³ share a similar political project - the slow building of working class power through the labor movement and other formal working class institutions. The limitations of this project - including its abjection of racialized and gendered surplus populations and failure to account for our present conditions of crisis and separation - have been dealt with at length already.⁴ But given this larger political orientation, it makes sense that UCSC’s latest statement touts the participation of a “larger core of organized rank and file workers” in the UAW as a win in itself. This alleged increase in active participation along with the size of this strike and the recent general uptick in academic unionization efforts appear to lend validity to the idea that this was just one stop on the road to a mass movement. However, we argue that the opposite is true; the breadth and depth of this strike serves as an example of the limits of building “organizing capacity.” The historic levels of participation and the infusion of energy from movements for abolition, disability justice, and others did not result in unprecedented gains, break new ground on non-wage demands, or revolutionize the union itself. Instead, it was hardly enough to maintain the status quo and win a boilerplate contract that fails to even defend wages against inflation, much less make serious gains. That this massive strike ended in a banal conclusion is but one example of a larger trend: the labor movement, weak as it is, requires more and more energy just to keep its head above water.

2 disaffected communists, “Seeing Ghosts: On the Negation of Worker-Student Life.” bit.ly/SeeGhosts_read.

3 We do not believe in fetishizing the “rank and file,” as this category erases real divisions of race, gender, ability, and other experiences of marginalization among graduate students. However, we do find it interesting that statements clearly labeled as coming from UAW leadership have nevertheless been considered expressions of “rank and file” sentiment.

4 disaffected communists, “Re-Emergence and Eclipse of the Proletariat” bit.ly/Reemergence_read and “Seeing Ghosts: On the Negation of Worker-Student Life” bit.ly/SeeGhosts_read.

In the end, union leadership's inability to conceive of any struggle outside the formal labor movement is a product of the labor movement itself and its role in maintaining the capital-labor relation. Unions mediate between labor and capital, between the workers and the bosses. They are therefore by necessity unable to contend with struggles that do not require this mediation, much less those that seek to challenge the very relations on which the labor movement is founded. What role can a union possibly have in a struggle that seeks gains for everyone, not just its members? One that does not affirm the worker but undermines the world of work and all its miseries? One that demands nothing but the end of this capitalist world?

If this strike has clarified anything, it is that the composition of graduate students - their internal differentiation, atomization, specialization, and 'tiering' through both prestige and income (now officially linked in the new contract) - presents a barrier to any coherent program of labor militancy. Even if the recent spike in academic unionization continues, the nature of the academic labor process, the high proportion of upwardly mobile STEM workers and those with access to generational wealth, and the transient terms of employment mean that any increase in the number of unionized grad workers is more than compensated for by their muted and reactionary character. It is this barrier that union leadership tries to erase by constantly invoking the "rank and file," as if just saying the phrase enough times will conjure unity out of separation, militancy out of comfortable careerism. While such obfuscations might help with recruitment, they do not change the facts on the ground. As communists, our question is what to do with the information the strike has afforded us. Given what we know, it seems unlikely that doubling down on the UAW will provide any path forward.

Union leadership will tell you that it is either the union or nothing, for in the end of the labor movement they see the end of their political strategy, the waning rather than building of working class power. We see things differently. Doing the same thing over and over, sticking to a failing strategy because it is the only thing you know, attempting to resurrect an organizational form whose time has long since passed, that to us is stagnation and death. That is the true "demobilization and inactivity," no matter how busy it might make you feel.

Luckily for us, the fate of the UAW is not our primary concern. Our task is to seek in every confrontation an opening for the generalization of struggle, those moments when barriers begin to thin and the possibility of communism glimmers on the horizon. We cannot tell you how or when that will happen, if it ever does. What we can say for certain is that when that moment arrives, the union will be just one more barrier to overcome.

