

Seeing Ghosts

On the Negation of Worker-Student Life



disaffected communists

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by disaffected communists

Impasse

We have arrived at a crossroads, so it seems. At least that is the narrative being spoon-fed by the ‘dissenting’ members of the bargaining team.¹ While the contract language around policing was never seriously up for consideration,² the split in the bargaining team emerged first around the “access needs” article before cementing itself around the meaning of ‘cost of living allowance’ or whether that language should be dropped entirely from the contract. In both cases, the vote came down 10-9 in favor of removing “access needs,” reducing the pay floor, and eliminating the language of ‘COLA’ from any tentative agreement.

This accounting is accurate, as far as the facts of the matter are concerned. We do not dispute the facts, nor are we concerned with them. What matters to us is what these conditions mean for the present possibility of the struggle. This is a matter of historical interpretation. If, as the much-revered bargaining team ‘dissidents’ argue, we have reached a deadlock, it is not immediately clear what that means on the ground. Their own take, with which you have no doubt been inundated over the last several weeks, is that the majority of the bargaining team, closely aligned with the UAW administrative caucus, has made a major strategic miscalculation. Believing the strength of the strike is found in the spectacle of the picket line, they have been fumbling negotiations and conceding major demands out of fear that the picket sign-ins are dropping as we near winter break. The correct analysis, so our heroic dissenters tell us, is that ‘peak power’ is a mirage that emerges from a naive theory of worker power. They tell us that worker power is a product of the quantity of labor withheld by the length of time over which it is held. Thus, we gain worker power with every passing hour, with every canceled lab, lecture, or discussion section, with every missed grant deadline, and with every ungraded paper or exam. As the semesters and quarters draw to a close, we reach the first real test of this power—in the form of unsubmitted grades for tens of thousands of students across the UC. This is a strike for the long haul, they say, and we are only just beginning.

Here, the analysis of the dissenting members of the bargaining team has converged with some popular ‘rank and file’ analysis that has been widely distributed on picket lines and digitally through social media since the beginning of the strike. Rank and file worker newsletters, such as *Strike! A Newsletter for Workers at Berkeley* at Berkeley and *UAW on Strike* from Santa Cruz, have become mouthpieces for the more ‘radical’ rank and file more generally. This makes some sense, given that academic workers at Berkeley and Santa Cruz are some of the most rent-burdened within the UC system.³ The current struggle

1 We would never do something as corny as refer to the split factions of the bargaining team as the “BT9” or the “BT10”.

2 See mack, “No University at the End of the World: On the Anti-Blackness of the University and the Union”; “Antiworking Conditions: Strike Means Fuck the Police”

3 For a breakdown of rent burden across UC campuses, see Daniel Masterson, “University of California PhD Pay is Among the Lowest in the U.S. After Accounting for Cost of Living”: https://cpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/campuspress.yale.edu/dist/a/487/files/2022/11/Masterson_PhD_stipends_v1_nov29_2022.pdf

is itself an extension of the wildcat strike that began at Santa Cruz in 2019, where rank and file UAW members there developed their analysis through “Pay Us More UCSC”, which writes and publishes *UAW on Strike*. Berkeley has one of the largest graduate student populations and is home to the largest bargaining units of UAW2865 and SRU.⁴ It is also adjacent to larger organizations across the Bay Area, such as the Communist Caucus of the Democratic Socialists of America or Tenant and Neighborhood Councils (TANC), each of which represent the assumed strategy of ‘base building’ working class power—through labor and tenant organizing—that leaps from the pages of *Strike!* As the story goes, the UC is both the largest employer and biggest landlord in the state of California. Thus, the strategy is deceptively simple and convincing, if painfully familiar: build working class organization through labor and tenants.⁵

Against this capacity building among workers, the union bureaucrats have opted for a different path. Increasingly pressed between an angry rank and file who feel betrayed by their union representatives and an unflinching UC bargaining team, who sit across the table having made virtually no concessions of their own, the bureaucrats have opted for the *representation* of ‘escalation’ in the spectacular acts of ‘nonviolent civil disobedience’ and the compliant and passive ‘occupation’ of administrative buildings. Dozens have been arrested this last week in this carnival of virtue signaling. The writers of *UAW on Strike* are correct to call this development “desperate” and “demoralizing”⁶ as it is carried out by petty bureaucrats who long for a quick resolution to a fiasco with the potential to drain UAW strike fund coffers. However, in their typically swift fashion, they presume a number of things that we believe deserve greater scrutiny. Unfortunately, in the rapidity of banal information overload that takes place on the picket, these analyses, branded as they are as ‘rank and file’, have very quickly gained favor.⁷ Each new missive declares that the tactical repertoire has been exhausted, implicitly or explicitly, with the exception of the long-term withdrawal of labor. The maturation of the strike, from this perspective, is synonymous with the coalescence of a rank-and-file strategy that privileges this withdrawal above all else. This is par for the course for any analysis of graduate student life or academic work as themselves something to be valorized, rather than negated. Many of our friends appear to have adopted this quasi-official

4 For a comprehensive breakdown of the UAW bargaining units across campuses, see: <https://ucnet.universityofcalifornia.edu/labor/bargaining-units/index.html>

5 The DSA Communist Caucus published “Our Moment: Proletarian Disorganization as the Problem of Our Time” earlier this year as an explicit diagnosis of the American ‘left’ as ‘disorganized’ and in need of ‘dense organization’, by which they mean essentially a not-so-distant relative of the ‘dual power’ model of building up ‘alternative’ proletarian institutions, traditional in form and formed by tradition.

6 See “How to Break a Deadlock”: <https://twitter.com/payusmoreucsc/status/1600203615129374721?s=20&ct=atHbOr7BHezRSymUcQDCZQ>

7 It is also ironic and worthy of note that ‘rank and file’ has been recently adopted by a decidedly conservative faction supported by the administrative caucus, branding themselves under the name “Solidarity”. These accounts have pushed back against ‘rank and file’ organizers who have been campaigning for COLA as ‘anti-union’ and are pushing for ratification of whatever tentative agreement the UC and UAW come to. We think this fiasco betrays the limits of ‘rank and file’ worker identity itself. This is why we prefer to frame the pertinent questions around communist prospects, rather than ‘democracy’ or the ‘union’.

‘rank and file’ line without much due consideration for its assumptions or implications.⁸ We wish to consider this matter more closely.

Our concerns can be grouped into three primary areas. The first is the *careless and naive characterization of the UAW’s activities as ‘escalation’ and ‘direct action’*, essentially taking the union at its own word, which flattens all material distinction between terms such as ‘direct action’, ‘civil disobedience’, ‘diversity of tactics’, ‘illegality’, ‘spectacle’, and ‘symbolic’. We suspect that the generalization here is meant to at once denounce the union bureaucrats’ retreat to the spectacular and communicative, while consolidating the rank and file around a strategy of the ‘long-haul strike’ by fending off direct actions—such as recurrent dining hall liberations and hard blockades of traffic and the flow of goods—that have appeared on its own fringes. The same organizers who publish these worker newsletters have said nothing in regards to these direct actions, preferring silent condemnation rather than a transparent assessment or appraisal. This absence of recognition would seem little more than a half-hearted redux of criticisms of ‘ultra-left adventurism’ that appeared during the 2009–2010 student movement,⁹ but which have been a constitutive feature of communist politics since the time of Marx. Here, they are in lockstep with the union officials, even if it is only the latter that explicitly communicates its disdain.

Second, *the prevailing diagnosis of the ‘rank and file’ rests on an understanding of the strike itself as fundamentally about instrumentalizing the withholding of labor towards a narrow set of contract demands.* Rank and file mouthpieces have made this abundantly clear in every one of their communications, as it reflects their theory of worker base building. Wresting the ‘COLA’ demand from the UC would amount to both an increase in real wages, against inflation in the cost of living, *and* disincentivizes the UC from raising rents, as they would factor into the cost of living. In our era of persistent inflation and stagnant productivity gains, especially in the nonmanufacturing sectors,¹⁰ COLA would thus achieve a significant victory in setting the price of labor-power and reducing the surplus revenue that the UC captures—it thereby reduces the rate of exploitation.¹¹ It thus is a necessary, if insufficient, condition

8 Representative of the analysis we are considering would be *Strike! Issue X 12.2.22* and *Issue XI 12.8.22*, *UAW on Strike* issues “How does a no vote fit into the ‘long-haul strike’ strategy?”, “How to break a deadlock”, “Peak Power”, and “No COLA, No Contract!”, as well as the “Strike Smart” graphic that has been circulating: <https://twitter.com/CharmaineSChua/status/1600583046830428162>. Magally Miranda Alcázar’s popular essay presents a similarly narrow conceptualization of the strike. See “As a UC Academic Worker, I Need a Contract That Addresses the Cost of Living”: <https://truthout.org/articles/as-a-uc-academic-worker-i-need-a-contract-that-addresses-the-cost-of-living>

9 See “After the Fall: Communiqués from Occupied California”: <https://libcom.org/article/after-fall-communiques-occupied-california>

10 See Aaron Benanav’s *Automation and the Future of Work* (2020) and Jason Smith’s *Smart Machines and Service Work: Autonomation in the Age of Stagnation* (2020).

11 Along with the demand for “COLA4ALL”, this orientation bears some resemblance to the workerist demand for a ‘generalized wage’, which later took the form of the ‘political wage’, delinking the wage not only from productivity, but from labor itself. See Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism*: <https://libcom.org/article/>

for building worker capacity in general. We submit that this is not an insignificant consideration, given the relative size of the UC's workforce and position of education in the social division of labor. Against a half century of wage stagnation and repression, such measures also seem to be immediately necessary for any meaningful return of the workers movement. Our issue lies not with this analysis of COLA as such, but what it betrays about their larger 'revolutionary' project.

It is here that we arrive at our final concern. *Both the first and second considerations rest on the more general premise that the path to communism lies in the slow, methodical, careful, (dare we say 'reasonable?') lurch towards the development of 'worker power' through worker 'organizations'.* 'Organization' here references the conventional notions—trade and industrial unions, workers councils, tenants unions, political parties, 'base building' more generally—of the formal party.¹² As we will explore below, any semblances of the traditional formal party have largely disaggregated and degenerated into defensive struggles. This leaves open the question of the forms of organization available in the present juncture and what sets their historical terms of engagement. If, as we maintain, the workers movement as such has been eclipsed by the resurgence of disaggregated proletarian revolt,¹³ and this character of proletarian activity has been attended by restructuring the capital-labor relation, what are the openings in our arena of struggle, in the sphere of reproduction in general and at the public university in particular?

It is our wager that 'we' have indeed reached an impasse, or a divergence of paths, or whatever pithy term you wish to apply. But the situation is not reducible to the tension between the business unionist strategy and the strategy of the 'rank and file'. Rather, it is a historical tension, emergent in our current era of secular crisis and the attendant restructuring of the capital-labor relation. The cycles of struggle have passed from a period of the program, represented by the adherents to the traditional 'formal party', through to a period in which the program is unrealizable. Struggle takes on a character distinct from formal worker organization. Yet worker organization as such must of necessity persist. *We argue that this tension is reproduced here in the current sequence as a tension between the formal strike and the general strike, or the generalization of revolt.*

A 'fair contract', no matter its gains, cannot but fail as a communist animus. We do not dispute that the 'strategy' of the strike managers is toothless and futile.¹⁴ They are charlatans, technocratic careerists and capitalists lackeys. Let us waste no more time on this miserable groupuscule. We are unequivocal: *the*

[storming-heaven-class-composition-and-struggle-italian-autonomist-marxism-steve-wright](https://libcom.org/article/storming-heaven-class-composition-and-struggle-italian-autonomist-marxism-steve-wright); For a critique, see Théorie Communiste, "Much Ado About Nothing": <https://libcom.org/article/storming-heaven-class-composition-and-struggle-italian-autonomist-marxism-steve-wright>

12 See Amadeo Bordiga, "Considerations on the party's organic activity when the general situation is historically unfavourable": <https://www.marxists.org/archive/bordiga/works/1965/consider.htm>

13 See "Re-emergence and Eclipse"

14 The so-called "BT10"

strike must continue. However, that this has been presented as some sort of incisive and resolute agitation should be seen for the fortuitous divulgence that it is. *In the long twilight of the workers movement, there is nothing luminous here.* If we are beginning at this foreclosure—that the narrowness of a contract is the only reasonable horizon—then we have already lost. Instead, we look for communism in our historical drift, in the *derivé*, in the cacophonous conflict with the material community of capital. *This is the strike we want.*

What is a Strike?

We have raised this question before.¹⁵ As it has been presented again and again to union members, faculty, students and the broader sympathetic public, a strike is nothing more than the withdrawal of labor, a measure taken as a last resort when negotiations have failed. While this may seem plain to the social democrats and ersatz-workerists in the rank and file,¹⁶ for us this characterization of the strike is constrained by both class belonging and formal membership and is historically limited.

Formally, the current strike is one protected by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) under our right to strike against the UC’s “unfair labor practices” (ULP). As the UAW has maintained, the UC has not been bargaining ‘in good faith’, so strikers maintain job protection during and after the strike. This mass withdrawal of labor is formally mediated and protected by union membership. Concomitant with these conditions for proletarian action, the strike not only reproduces class belonging, but union membership, as an external constraint. This is the case with essentially all worker action in the United States. To act as a ‘working’ class is to act through the formal mediation of the union—either through electoral and bureaucratic mechanisms, rank and file organizing, self-management, or syndicalism. Regardless of its various stripes, the formalist program itself only mediates the reproduction of the proletariat as a necessary moment in the reproduction of capital. *It cannot break free of this integration and mutual antagonism.*¹⁷ To act as a class—to build up formal working class organizations and conventional institutions to ‘base build’ working class power—is to develop and affirm the proletariat as a pole of the capital relation. It is to affirm and reproduce capital itself. Unionism is just one particularly insidious form of this program.

The present ‘formal strike’ is then self-limiting. This should come as no surprise to anyone reading any of the ‘rank and file’ newsletters. Though they advocate for a long haul strategy, they instrumentalize the strike as a means to achieve the strongest bargaining position. This is evident not only in their statements

15 “Re-emergence and Eclipse”

16 E.g., documents such as “Strike Smart” clearly assert that “The purpose of striking is to do financial damage to the boss... The best way to hurt the boss is to withhold our labor from which they benefit.” <https://twitter.com/berkeleyRnF/status/1597018564632145922>

17 The classic analysis is offered by Theorie Communiste in texts such “Self-organisation is the first act of the revolution; it then becomes an obstacle which the revolution has to overcome”, “The Glass Floor”, and “The Present Moment”.

but from the strategy itself, which would be untenable were it not for the eventual foreclosure of strike activity via a renewed contract between capital and labor in the form of a cost of living adjustment. The only purpose of a formal strike is to reproduce the capital labor relation on different terms contingent upon the balance of class forces; it of course does not eliminate the antagonism.

Why, then, do the social democrats, syndicalists, and ersatz-workerists, who appear committed—in deed and affinity, at least, if not in letter—to building worker power against ‘the bosses’, to building socialism and communism through wielding alternative proletarian institutions, insist on a strategy of self-limitation? They certainly do not see it as self-limiting. As noted above, a cost of living adjustment would amount to a reduction in the rate of exploitation. It is an attack on capital, or at least an expropriation of the surplus captured by the university against our wages. More importantly for their larger political project, they see it as capacity building.

But such conceptions of proletarian self-activity are delimited by historical conditions in the mode of capital’s self-reproduction. We do not live in the era of the strike in the classical sense¹⁸, as the mass withdrawal of labor at the point of production. In the United States, this era was both tardy and short-lived. As a settler colony and racial regime with a large population of enslaved agrarian workers, much of the labor force was tied to the land well into the early 20th century. Though industrialization lagged behind the Anglo-metropole of England, it came swiftly and decisively, albeit punctuated by two world wars. It was this period of about a century in length, between Reconstruction and the height of the Vietnam War, that saw the uneven and racialized consolidation of the workers movement.¹⁹ This process of proletarianization was most rapid following World War I and after the waves of black migration to industrial cores. The height of unionization and strike activity occurred in the late 1940s through 1950s, but by then union bureaucracies had already seized the workers movement and were in the process of purging communists and anarchists, along with disciplining and segregating black workers. From about 1950 to the end of the 1960s, manufacturing in the United States achieved an unprecedented rate of profit and along with it gains in productivity, real wages, and investments in new plant, equipment, and labor.²⁰ In this context, unions such as the UAW were able to negotiate wage increases pinned to productivity gains, but in doing so they began to spell the decline of the union and the workers movement itself. The automation of this period began to displace greater segments of ‘unskilled labor’, with black workers hit first and hardest.²¹ On the international level, this rapid accumulation of capital appeared as a constraint in the form of ‘overabundance’, ‘excess capacity’, and competition. By the mid 1960s, prices began to fall and with them the rate of profit, first in the United

18 For a good history of the rise and fall of the workers movement, see Endnotes, “A History of Separation.”

19 We explore this as well in “Re-emergence and Eclipse”

20 See Robert Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence* (2006)

21 See James Boggs’ account of the UAW in “The Rise and Fall of the Union”: <https://libcom.org/library/chapter-1-rise-fall-union>

States, which was shortly followed by other overdeveloped countries. This secular tendency of the capitalist mode of production to undermine its own capacity for accumulation has translated into a general shift—initiated in earnest by the oil crisis of 1973—from capital accumulation to profit and rent-seeking, an increasingly zero sum game leading to a protracted period of stagnation with punctuated financialized bubbles.

This long downturn of accumulation since the early 1970s has been managed by capital with what we might call the ‘long downturn of labor’.²² Investment has moved from manufacturing to non-manufacturing, services, and the so-called FIRE sector (Finance, Insurance, Real Estate).²³ These sectors are typically non-unionized, more difficult for workers to organize as a technical matter, and more difficult for capital to mechanize, given the nature of the services involved. Still, because non-manufacturing sectors are able to raise prices without being exposed to international competition and suppress wage costs without union intervention, they have remained generally more profitable. Both capital and labor have shifted as a result and productivity as a whole has thus stagnated for the last half century. In manufacturing, investment opportunities for new plant and equipment or entirely new lines remain bleak in prospect. As a consequence of this systemic restructuring, the general tendency has been for capital to shed ‘redundant’ labor and capital in domestic manufacturing and increase output by increasing the rate of exploitation. What labor is shed either is absorbed by the nonmanufacturing and service sectors, thereby driving down real wages through competition, which in turn increases the movement of capital and labor to those sectors in an inverse wage-price spiral, or becomes a part of the relative surplus population of under- or unemployed—the ‘gig’ and ‘informal’ economies of the dispossessed.

In this era, formal strikes have been primarily defensive in character. The rate of unionization has declined precipitously from its post-war boom peak and both the size and frequency of labor activity has declined with it. The formal activity that remains has coalesced around anything from defense of the wage against the inflation in the means of subsistence to defense of the right to strike to defense of benefits and pensions to defense of the unions themselves. More pointedly, labor struggles in this era have been largely reduced as struggles for access to work itself, access to the wage-form, as it is the only mediation available to ensure the reproduction of proletarian existence at all. It is in this sense that we agree with *Théorie Communiste* that the mere fact of acting as a class now appears as an external constraint.²⁴ The defensive character of struggle reigns and betrays its secret: the proletariat is a mode of existence of capital, and when we defend ourselves and our right to exist ‘as workers’ we are defending capital. The era of the workers movement has passed. The world of the worker and for the worker is dead.

22 See Jason Smith, “Striketober: Labor’s Long Downturn”

23 This shift has occurred within the UAW itself. Some 100,000 of the UAW’s 400,000 members are now academic workers: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-11-18/california-strike-by-48-000-academic-workers-flexes-uaw-s-muscle>

24 “Much Ado About Nothing”

All is not lost, however. The disaggregation of capital and labor has produced a deluge of ‘nonlabor’ activity and informal organization as an offensive attack on capital and the forms that mediate and enforce proletarian existence: the police, state functionaries, union, schools, universities. These struggles against the reproduction of proletarian life have their center not in the hidden abode of production, in the classic sense, but in the ‘anarchy’ of circulation and reproduction. ‘Circulation struggles’ and ‘reproduction struggles’ here are both direct attacks on capital—e.g., looting of commodities, destruction of property, blockades of circulation—and attacks on the reproduction of the proletariat—offensives against the police, against prisons and other forms of state administration, against the ‘family’, against gender, against race.

Following the crisis of profitability, capitalist restructuring has disaggregated manufacturing processes, ‘aerosolizing’ production across the planet and thus internalizing the process of circulation. Logistics is the order of the day. What this means is that any neat and tidy separation of the sphere of ‘production’ from the sphere of ‘circulation’ cannot be easily maintained. They are integrated in complex ways and have reproduced the antagonism of the capital relation in similarly complex ways. If proletarian existence is mediated through circulation and reproduction and this is the terrain of social conflict in our era, then struggle here not only attacks proletarian existence—it interferes with production itself.²⁵ This is the meaning of the historical decoupling of the reproduction of capital from the reproduction of labor: two terms have been recomposed to open up an attack on the banality of proletarian life itself. This is an attack on the economy as such, a negation of the capital relation through the suspension and abolition of both of its terms—capital and proletariat. This generalization of revolt might be called insurrection, a general strike, or maybe a mass strike,²⁶ in which the conditions for spontaneity-cum-coordination are brought to the fore by the mute compulsions of political economy. In the present and protracted crisis, these conditions have reoriented from the formal withdrawal of labor to attacks on capital *beyond* the immediate process of production. Even during their Golden Age, for formal strikes to open into general strikes, they tended to be accompanied by sabotage, occupations, blockades, and expropriations. Now, in our present post mortem, these circulation and reproduction struggles increasingly take center stage in their capacity to destroy the economy.

For that particular institution that we call the university: what does this practically mean? Before considering this, we must first assess historically how the university is imbricated in the capital relation. If we wish to consider the strike as an offensive attack on the reproduction of capital, this returns us to the considerations of the actual compositions of capital and labor on and among campuses.

25 See Research and Destroy, “Limit Analysis and its Limits”: <https://researchanddestroy.wordpress.com/2014/04/13/limit-analysis-and-its-limits/>

26 Rosa Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike*: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/download/mass-str.pdf>

Business as Usual

The fundamental function of the university is the reproduction of the relationship between capital and labor.²⁷ Perhaps, in a bygone era, we could stretch this to say that the university fundamentally reproduces labor-power for the market. What a dreadful thought: the Golden Age of churning out ‘skilled’ labor for the increasingly technologically integrated manufacturing world of the post-war boom is now behind us. What is left is still less clear. The social democratic tendencies of the union rank and file cling to the ‘public university’ as a public good and social mandate, a bastion of intellectual inquiry and class mobility, necessary for the ‘good life’ promised by socialism and held hostage by capitalism. At best, that university is dead along with the Golden Age its image conjures. A more sober assessment would be that it never existed in earnest. Already the product of colonialism, racial domination, and heteropatriarchy,²⁸ the thin veneer of ‘education’ that cloaked the university existed by virtue of the caprice of capital during the era of its long expansion. Ever fickle, capital constrains as much as it makes allowances. With the long downturn beginning in the late 1960s, that veneer began to crack.

This in turn has led to a disaggregation of the university’s functions. With the decoupling of capitalist production and the reproduction of labor-power, the university has increasingly taken on a twofold character. On the one hand, to the extent that it reproduces labor-power, it does so by managing a portion of the surplus population with declining future employment prospects, especially in the productive sectors of the economy. It thus does not occupy the same role in directly reproducing labor-power that will go on to be capital forming. From the perspective of capital, then, the university offers diminishing returns in the sphere of production. Yet it is not superfluous to the turnover of capital. Indeed, on the other hand, it has been rescued as a sink for surpluses of circulating capital: in the form of highly leveraged debt-financed capital projects and real estate speculation, made possible by the asset-price Keynesianism practiced by university managers with university endowments, and through the securitization of student fees and the financialization of student debt made possible by rising tuition. At the university, like the capitalist world of which it is part and parcel, the reproduction of capital and the reproduction of labor have decoupled and diverged.

Since the second half of the 1980s, real estate, finance, and construction have expanded dramatically relative to the manufacturing sector of the US economy.²⁹ As the university’s role in reproducing labor-power has shifted towards absorbing the surplus population, its function for surplus capital is no longer determined by levels of investment in new production that can attract growing populations of skilled, educated workers. Concurrent to this decline has been

27 For a good overview, see Harvie et al, “The Political Economy of the Public University”

28 See Craig Steven Wilder *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America’s Universities* and Robert Lee and Tristan Ahton, “Land-Grab Universities”

29 See Brenner

wave after wave of austerity that reduces the public funds available to public universities to pay for programming and instruction and to meet the growing demand for college education.³⁰ In this climate the significance of revenue generating activities is brought into relief. Rather than state funds, university operations pivot on tuition and fees, sports, events, housing, conferences, and student activities. Nevertheless, despite massive rises in tuition, fees, and housing over the last several decades, public universities remain saddled with debt. Even with this debt, the UC and other universities are able maintain highly favorable bond ratings because they can use tuition as leverage.³¹ The modern university typically takes on both short and long-term debt with banks and by issuing bonds, which then consign university managers to increase revenue streams by expanding construction operations (capital projects), raising tuition, fees, and other rents, reducing overheads, expanding class sizes, relying on contingent and adjunct instruction, and investing the majority of their endowments in speculative vehicles. They also increasingly venture into public-private partnerships and other ‘special purpose vehicles’, which are effectively public sector subsidies for private investment, feeding further bubbles in asset prices. This is how they maintain surpluses on their ledgers, which they then take with them when seeking further financing.³²

Universities operate with these ‘artificially’ high credit ratings and attract surplus capital that cannot find adequate investment in the productive sector in the face of stagnant manufacturing profits. Rather than funding expanded instruction, these funds are funneled into capital projects that may or may not be revenue-generating on their own; what is clear is that they are not intended to accommodate increased enrollment.³³ Nevertheless, it is tuition that in actual practice pays the return on investment in construction. If, in fact, the student body is not increasing on par with the demand for higher education, then debt-financed construction projects are little more than real estate speculation mediated by the public institution. Though in reality they run into the red, managers are able to attract financial investment through leveraging and securitizing tuition and fees, pressing them to raise tuition and fees over the short and long term, giving the appearance of account surpluses. This, in turn, attracts more investors to buy up student loans. But universities do not then use that revenue to pay for expanded instruction, because the cost of instruction eats into their account surpluses. Instead they funnel it into real estate, construction, and infrastructure, dispossessing and gentrifying in and around college campuses and driving up housing costs. These capital projects are long-

30 Despite declining employment prospects and labor force participation for college graduates, the divergence in prospects relative to those with no college education remains quite stark.

31 This of course was a major source of discontent during the student unrest of 2009-2010. See “They Pledged Your Tuition” by Bob Meister: <https://ucaft.org/content/they-pledged-your-tuition>

32 For the foregoing, see “They Pledged Your Tuition”, “The Political Economy of the Public University”, “Securitization, Risk Management, and the New University” by Amanda Armstrong: <https://reclaimuc.blogspot.com/2015/01/securitization-risk-management-and-new.html>, and “Circulation and the New University” by Brian Whitener and Dan Nemser: <https://libcom.org/article/circulation-and-new-university-reclamations-journal>

33 See “They Pledged Your Tuition” for the mechanism in detail.

term and capital-intensive and seen by university managers as an investment and further revenue-generating activity. Externally, this same principle leads them to tie up endowments in asset vehicles, such as real estate, equity, hedge funds, and venture capital.

This trend is not shocking when viewed in the broader context. Since the 1980s but especially since the mid-1990s, the most dynamic and turbulent sectors of the economy have been in nonmanufacturing, principally in equities and real estate, giving rise to the dotcom bubble and housing bubble, respectively. Throughout this period, asset price appreciation has more or less continuously driven a construction boom. This vicious cycle has meant that speculative asset appreciation has increasingly been mediated through universities, especially since the collapse of the housing market and subsequent Great Recession. As those asset markets and vehicles unwound, money increasingly crept into the corridors of ‘knowledge’ to find student loan markets and secondary markets, construction bonds, and lease-revenue bonds.

This integration of nonproductive capital into the circuits of the university is a sign of the times. The era of capital accumulation is at its terminus, in one way or another. Ours is an era of disaggregation and decomposition. Still, productive capital does find ways to instrumentalize the university. It does so primarily by subsidizing and thereby reducing the cost of research and development through public-private partnerships. This too is a sign of the times. As a component in the formation of the value of constant capital, research and development is a cost of production that drags down the rate of profit. In the face of secularly declining profitability, capitalists are compelled to reduce the costs of production by cheapening the elements of constant capital.³⁴ By partnering with universities and using state funds to fund research with consequences (and patents) for the private sector, they are able to accomplish the trick.³⁵

The public university occupies a relatively strategic place in the general social division of labor. Though its significance to total social reproduction has waned, it is, broadly considered, still squarely an institution of the sphere of reproduction and, increasingly, circulation. The flow of circulating capital through the university has intensified in recent decades. The logistics revolution has left no stone unturned. The university is integrated into the supply chain in ways particular to the present contradictions of the capital-labor relation. In general, the sphere of social reproduction is organized through the misfortunes of race, gender, and the family. As the university is occupied less and less by the productive workers of the future, it is tasked instead with managing a growing student population made up of the surplus, the indebted, and the ‘downwardly mobile’. At the same time, the social reproduction that is carried out on university campuses, whether in the form of precarious instructional labor or the various ‘services’ on campus—food service, maintenance, custodial,

34 Marx called this cheapening of the elements of constant capital one of the principle factors counteracting the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. See Marx, *Capital: Volume III*, 339.

35 “Circulation and the New University” and “Securitization, Risk Management, and the New University”

landscaping, sanitation—are increasingly feminized and racialized.³⁶ This uneven composition of both capital and labor, their disaggregation and fragmentation, makes struggle here less amenable to the ‘unification’ of working class identity and more so to the generalization of proletarian revolt.

Passage

As we have argued elsewhere, the present sequence of struggles has passed from open racialized rebellion into a protracted period of ‘working class’ reconstitution.³⁷ This sequence has been characterized by a degree of overt state repression and counterinsurgency, to be sure, but the fundamental determinant has been internal to the revolt itself. That is, formal mediations—social justice organizations, political parties, platforms, electoral politics—insinuated themselves between the revolt and its representation in attempts to ‘unify’ the actors involved, some populist, most ‘democratic’, and many ostensibly ‘radical’.

Critiques of the recuperation of the George Floyd Rebellion are not novel.³⁸ Where we depart is our emphasis on the role of ‘working class’ identity and the resurgence of ‘labor’ in this process. The arc here moved from heterogenous and uneven revolt to the pursuit of building relatively homogenous working class power. During the long boom of capitalist expansion, the acme of the workers movement, this unification was achieved through subsumption to the white male worker. In the long downturn, such unification appears as ‘working class power’, but remains anachronistic at best. Through the long nadir of the workers movement, the product of the disarticulation of the relationship between the proletariat and capital, the concrete differentiation through which the proletariat is objectively reproduced has been generalized and brought into the foreground. For proles, production has yielded to reproduction, and this realm has always been highly atomized and disintegrated. Here, ‘class belonging’ in the abstract must be mediated in the concrete. Though this is the general condition of uprisings today, it is also a concomitant limit.

So, we find ourselves back where we started: the impasse. But now we can examine it in a new light—*in situ*—provided by the preceding historical and political economic detour. For our social democratic, syndicalist, and workerist counterparts, this impasse appears as an opposition between the long-haul strike and the frenetic capitulations of union management. While we concur with their assessment of the UAW’s lack of strategy, we must note here, critically, that their conceptualization of ‘working class power’ rests on a theory of unification that is wholly out of step and woefully inadequate in our period of decomposition. For us, the impasse takes the form of this contradiction, this tension between ‘working class’ identity forged through unified action and

36 Endnotes, “The Logic of Gender”; Low End Theory, “Theses on Adjunctification”: <https://www.lowendtheory.org/post/112138864200/theses-on-adjunctification>

37 “Re-emergence and Eclipse”

38 ‘Ultra-left’ critiques of ‘identity’ abound, to varying effect and with little nuanced appreciation for the concrete materiality of race and gender in the abstraction of the proletariat.

towards methodically building capacity, on the one hand, and the generalization of the strike through the generalization of revolt against capital, on the other. As struggle in general is necessarily differentiated and fragmented, the only passage into communism comes through pushing against the limits of discrete, disarticulated struggle to produce the conditions of its own overcoming. *Struggles must overflow into the general antagonism against the misery of everyday life.*³⁹

There is thus a continuity and a rupture between the formal strike and the general strike. The ‘rank and file’ unionists have betrayed their fidelity to the formal program. For them, the strike must be contained to the withdrawal of labor and any divergence from this ‘united front’ must be disciplined, or at least ridiculed from on high. Whether or not they see it for what it is, they have retreated to the defensive struggle, the last refuge of the programmatist. To present these narrow means of struggle as an offensive pursuit and the *only* reasonable, strategic, and ‘mature’ path to extract concessions from ‘the bosses’ and toward the construction of a communist program is an artifact of an era long since passed. *The workers movement is dead and all attempts to resurrect it as such are anachronistic and exercises in necromancy.*

We would like to end with some general theses on expanding this strike from the formal to the general. In the absence of that overcoming, the strike in itself will be little more than an exercise in self-valorization.⁴⁰ *We, however, seek the negation of worker-student life—the total breakdown of the university and its functions—because we seek the end of capital.* To that end, we offer the following.

1. Generalization of student strikes has in fact been a persistent feature of student activity since the beginning of the long downturn. Some of the most lauded experiences come from the Parisian May of 1968 through the activities of students at the Sorbonne,⁴¹ or from the sequence of student strikes and occupations that culminated in the events of the Italian “Hot Autumn” of 1969.⁴² In both instances, the generalization of revolt led to the development of work-student coordination that both superseded and antagonized union

39 For the distinction between ‘unification’ and ‘generalization’, see “Under the Riot Gear”, “Generalisation is the only communist horizon of the present moment.”: <https://libcom.org/article/under-riot-gear-rust-bunny-collective>

40 Here we must soberly admit that unfortunately this is the manifestation that we anticipate. After all, graduate students tend to be a tepid bunch.

41 Roger Gregoire and Fredy Perlman, *Worker-Student Action Committees, France May '68*: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/perlman-fredy/1969/workerstudent-action-committees-france-may.html>; René Viénet, *Enragés and Situationists in the Occupations Movement*: <https://libcom.org/article/enrages-and-situationists-occupations-movement>

42 It is notable that, like their Parisian counterparts, students developed networks with striking workers, who, after being largely abandoned by the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and its union the Italian General Confederation of Labour (CGIL), relied on ‘worker-student’ networks of communication and coordination. The union perceived the student movement to be undermining its organizational role. See “Worker and student struggles in Italy, 1962-1973”: <https://libcom.org/article/worker-and-student-struggles-italy-1962-1973-sam-lowry>; “The Workerists and the unions in Italy’s ‘Hot Autumn’”: <https://libcom.org/article/workerists-and-unions-italys-hot-autumn>

bureaucrats and established Communist Party functionaries. Though less devastating to political and economic stability, general strikes at universities were quite numerous and destructive in the United States beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, following the long, hot summers of black rebellion in '67 and '68.⁴³ In this sequence of struggles, the generalized and antagonistic character of revolt was preserved. In California, Reagan declared a 'state of emergency' after the Black Student Union at San Francisco State College (SFSC) led the formation of the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) and initiated the longest student strike in US history, which began first at SFSC and then spread to UC Berkeley. Militant students of color disrupted campus life for months on end and engaged in open conflict with the police and National Guard.⁴⁴ On the national stage, dozens of buildings burned across college campuses and the National Guard was routinely deployed. More recently, the 2009-2010 occupation movement across California galvanized antagonistic elements before spreading into the occupy movement and port blockades.⁴⁵ In the recent cycles of struggles, student general strikes have been a constitutive feature of general revolt all over the world—from Chile to Brazil to Hong Kong to Iran to South Africa.

2. Given this general tendency and the historical terrain on which we find ourselves, this strike itself must be seen as a potential rupture into the possibility of general strike, or general interruption into the realms of (re) production and circulation, rather than a merely a defensive struggle. This would be to transform the defensive into the offensive attack on the economy as such. It is both possible and necessary. For this to generalize, the present institutional limit—the university as such—must be overcome.

3. In defensive struggles, such as defending the price of labor-power against inflation in the cost of living, the expropriative character of struggle is stillborn. At best, it is only a half-measure. While it eats into the pecuniary gains of the university, by raising the cost of instruction without a compensatory increase in revenue streams, even the COLA demand remains defensive in that it is exercised only through maintenance of the capital-labor relation as such. It might act in the favor of the pole of labor, as against the pole of 'capital', but the terms of that relation are only affirmed when workers struggle to maintain access to the wage. To take full measures of expropriation—to be communist in character—struggle must generalize to the extent that neither capital nor labor are affirmed. Both terms are suspended through acts of negation: communist measures.

43 In May 1970, following the Kent State shooting and a series of police shootings of black students and protestors, "448 campuses were either striking or shut down: some four million students and 350,000 faculty were taking part in what amounted to a campus general strike. During the first week in May, thirty ROTC buildings were burned or bombed and National Guard units were mobilized on twenty-one campuses in sixteen states." See Max Eblau, *Revolution in the Air* (2018), 27.

44 *Revolution in the Air*, 27-30, 77; "San Francisco State: On Strike": https://archive.org/details/cbpf_000124. The TWLF would re-emerge at Berkeley in 1999, though in a far more muted form. See also "Against the University, Against the Hydra!" (forthcoming essay by some friends).

45 "After the Fall"

4. Antagonism at the increasingly crucial points of circulation must be brought into the foreground of any further considerations of the strike and its unfolding developments. In our current context, this has been occurring through dining hall occupations, expropriations of food and resources, and blockades of entrances into the university, which disrupt the flow of goods and services. Other opportunities for sabotage, property destruction, and expropriation abound.

5. The union has recently turned ‘blockades’ and ‘occupations’ into spectacles, but these ‘direct actions’ have not in fact stopped the flow of capital.⁴⁶ We assert vehemently that these are ‘direct actions’ in name only. They are not practical actions oriented towards generalizing the strike. Nevertheless, the ‘rank and file’ mouthpieces have gone on to dismiss ‘blockades’ and ‘occupations’ as entirely about shifting public opinion, eliding the very real capacity for these tactics, when deployed in earnest, to shut down the operations of the university.

6. The university’s integration into the supply chain has been reflected by increased securitization of value flows. As instruction and reproduction of labor-power have receded in significance, they have been replaced by profit- and rent-seeking capital accompanied by the protective assurance of police violence. Supply chain security is a preponderant influence in university management. The university manages ‘risk’ in this regard by managing the population on campus and litigating who does and does not ‘belong’. The ‘non-affiliate’ that provokes the anxieties of the administration is racialized and subjected to disproportionate levels of police surveillance, harassment, and violence.⁴⁷

7. Any generalization of the strike is contingent upon an antagonistic posture towards the police—not just the campus police, but police in general as enforcers of the racialized capital-labor relation. It is little wonder then that the leading edge of the circulation struggles throughout this strike have been carried out by autonomous factions organized around police abolition and anticolonialism. Not only do the bureaucrats condemn this rabble, but the ‘rank and file’ formations have adopted a stance of restrained pretension and quiet disapproval. The homology between the administration’s racialized supply chain security and the union’s policing of acceptable strike activities should give us pause.

8. Coordinated attack on the circulation of capital cannot be subsumed by the bureaucracy of the union, nor need it be reduced to hand-wringing about ‘strategy’ and ‘realistic’ goals. It is the generalization of the strike, realized when defensive struggles merge with offensive ones, that seizes the self-reproduction of the university. Any politics or strategy, whether offered by

46 These actions have been nothing but symbolic, as union strike marshalls have ensured that traffic remains unimpeded.

47 “Securitization, Risk Management, and the New University”; “No University at the End of the World”

union bureaucrats or ‘radical’ rank and file, that refuses this generalization of expropriation as ‘naive’, ‘disorganized’, or ‘irresponsible’ is *not* communist in character.⁴⁸

We close with a final thought. Though our interpretations of the impasse and potential openings diverge significantly from the self-appointed representatives of the rank and file, we confess that we both find ourselves seeing ghosts. The strategists for unification, who assume the working class as a homogenous mass, the self-activity of which is to be affirmed, are practicing a necromancy to raise the corpse of the historical workers movement. As opposed to this, we who seek the generalization of revolt find the specter of communism on the fringes of this activity, ushered in by our era of expropriation without demand. *This* is the ghost haunting the general antagonism, *the sweeping enmity against the material community of capital*. It finds struggle as it is, on its own terms—differentiated, racialized, gendered—and through this motley composition is able to swell small expropriations into larger ones and communist measures into communism.⁴⁹

48 Phil Neel, “The Knife At Your Throat”: <https://brooklynrail.org/2022/10/field-notes/The-Knife-At-Your-Throat>

49 Léon de Mattis, “Communist Measures”: <http://sicjournal.org/communist-measures-2>

