

# WHAT DOES THE STRIKE MEAN?

## WHAT ARE THE POTENTIALS OF THE STRIKE?

The strike is often conceived as an *economic* tool—workers wield it to bring a part of production to a standstill, in order to assert their demands. But what is the character of the demands of the strike? At first, it appears that the demands are merely economic, being about the immediate relations between the worker and employer.

But the actual content of the demands is *political*. Through a strike, workers demand the reorganization of society. By striking, they assert that they can no longer tolerate it as it is. The strike expresses the attempt of workers to take leadership of society.

One high expression of the strike as political was the English textile workers strike in 1862, when they refused to work on cotton produced by slavery of the American South. They opposed the English capitalists and Southern Landed Aristocracy in solidarity with the free industrial workers of the North.

This strike asserted the political demand that society be founded on free labor, not unfree labor, even though the strike also produced their own starvation and destitution; their own immediate livelihoods being dependent on the textile industry.

But the English workers recognized that the existence of unfree slave labor meant that their own labor was unfree—that the institution of slavery did not only dominate the slaves, but it dominated all of society.

## WHY WE MUST UNDERSTAND ITS POLITICAL DEMANDS

The strike today also goes beyond merely the economics of immediate needs. The strike is not the cry of *feed me* and *house me*. The strike is not arguing for the expansion of welfare from the state. The strike is not the infantile terrorism that the baby inflicts upon the world as it screams and screams until its mother gives it what it wants.

This is not a group of workers trying to beat the rest of society into submission. It is not an attempt to subject society to the interests of a few. For that would

be a crime—it would invite the disintegration of society into rackets, blasting apart society into warring interest groups.

No. This strike is not a crime precisely because it is not merely about the base satisfaction of economic needs of a few. The strike stakes a universal claim about how all of society *should* be organized. The claim is simply this: all workers, academic or otherwise, should not only be able to feed and house themselves, but also to enjoy themselves in their human existence, because it is they themselves who produce the social value needed to make society possible.

When workers strike, they're saying that *they* constitute society: society is we who work, not the cake-eating freeloaders.

And so, it is we who shall lead society as well.

The appearance of the strike is the telltale sign that a crime has been committed. Society seems to have already devolved into rackets, and the academic workers find that they must combine into their own academic workers interest group to protect themselves. We know this for it is evident from our immediate material conditions.

But one crime is not rectified by another. If we are to demand *merely* the amelioration of our economic conditions, this means that we accept and join in bringing about the disintegration of society into rackets. And the imperial state, mandated by limping society to hold all of its interest groups together, must then become the greatest racket of them all. Ever more militarized, it forces all of society to play nice with each other. Just look to the recent bill making the imminent railway strike illegal. It's backed up by state power.

Yes, society is in a state of crime, of warring interest groups. And to preserve ourselves as academic workers, we find it necessary to combine and unionize. But if we do not clarify our own political demands, all that the strike can mean is the preservation of *ourselves* as *academic workers*. That is, as we exist now.

We strike now because we must assert our right to exist, not just as academic workers, but as members of society. The strike must show us how we must revolt against the disintegration of society into rackets.

How could the English textile workers make their political demands, though those demands directly opposed to their economic interests? It was because they understood that the organization of society as it was—reliant on the institution of slavery—meant the domination of all labor. They understood concretely how unfree labor subjugated free labor by undermining its value.

Actual political transformation requires that we understand actual conditions.

## **WHY THE STRIKE REQUIRES OUR SELF-EDUCATION**

If we are to take seriously that the strike expresses the demand that working society ought to have a place for all workers, then we must understand what the Union is and what it is not.

The Union protects its workers, allowing them to exist in a society that has broken down into interest groups. That is its only mandate. It claims no more responsibility than that—not to ask how did society get to this state, nor to elevate its workers' aspirations for how society should be. Thus, the Union cannot lead the strike beyond its immediate concerns.

The Union's existence is predicated on rackets. The workers' human existence is predicated on society.

When we imagine society in a state of crime, it seems that the next question then is *who* has committed the crime? In which case, here it appears to be the UC administration. That through greed or indifference they have committed the crime of stealing from the academic workers by not paying us the fair value of our labor.

The problem if we think that UC is stealing the value of our academic work is that we forget that academic work has value, not because the UC is willing to pay us for it, but because it is valuable to society. As institutions, the UC, or more broadly, the Academy, have no intrinsic need for something called "academic work". The UC merely provides the form of organization so that labor and capital can combine to produce value—out of academic work.

And what is academic work? It is the production of the very *potentials* of society. Academic work creates both open-ended knowledge and the well-socialized young people wielding it.

Therefore, the problem perhaps isn't so straightforward as figuring out who has committed the crime. The question might more be about *why* is there a crisis in realizing the value of academic work? That is, the potentials of society? Why is the current organization of the Academy (and thus of society) inadequate to support the work that academic workers want to bring about?

We need to understand why there is a strike at the heart of the Academy. The academic workers strikes are not only at UC. Recently, they have been at many other peer universities that are integral to how society and capital reproduce. In what ways is this massive bureaucratic machine failing to organize labor and capital? To what extent do the demands of the strike have to take up the organization of the Academy?

The early academic labor movements of the 60s expressed the politics of the relation between the Academy and Capital: whether the Academy should be corporate. Today, the Academy is completely corporatized. It is disciplined by all of society through capital. And all of society is disciplined by the Academy. Thus, to what extent do demands of the strike have to take up the organization of society?

If academic work produces the *potentials* of society, we need to also understand how those potentials are or are not being realized. As of now, industry is the site where those potentials are realized. To what extent do we need to account for the massive hiring freezes and layoffs in industry? Of the increasing cost-of-living? Of the recent uptick in unionization and strikes?

The strike must become *political* because it is ultimately pointing at the workers' demand to take leadership of society. If we are to take the current strike seriously, we need to be able to understand what it is concretely that is to be transformed, through what mechanism, and for what.

For it matters *who* is taking leadership of society and to what ends. ■

For further discussion, come by Platypus @ UC San Diego.  
[platypus-ucsd.github.io](https://platypus-ucsd.github.io)

