

Opposition grows to police attack on UC Davis students

Joseph Kishore
22 November 2011

There are certain events that serve to lift the veil on class relations, lay bare the social and political reality of American life, and become the focal point for mass public outrage. The deliberately vicious pepper spraying of unarmed students at the University of California, Davis is one of these events.

Millions of people have viewed videos depicting a police officer methodically spraying seated students as if he was using insecticide against roaches. The gratuitous and sadistic action on Friday afternoon sent at least two people to the hospital, one of whom was coughing blood for hours afterwards. Ten students were thrown to the ground and forcibly arrested.

The students were engaged in protests against economic inequality and soaring tuition as part of the nationwide Occupy movement. In attacking these protesters, the police officer was acting not simply as an individual or even on behalf of the UC system, but fundamentally as a representative of the state and the ruling class, which is taking coordinated steps nationwide to violently shut down the initial expression of mass social opposition in the United States.

So far, more than 4,600 people involved in Occupy protests have been arrested nationwide, and both Democratic and Republican Party mayors have coordinated their actions in recent weeks to shut down encampments. In California, police have struck protesters at UC Berkeley with batons and fired tear gas and rubber bullets at protesters in Oakland. Local governments are being advised behind the scenes by the FBI and the Obama administration's Department of Homeland Security.

It is impossible to ignore the connection between these actions and the attacks on demonstrators at Tahrir Square in Egypt, where opponents of the US-backed military regime that replaced Mubarak have been

viciously attacked. There may be a difference in degree, but not in kind. Indeed in countries throughout the world, the ruling elite is moving ever more directly to utilize its tools of repression.

In an interview on the Jane Velez-Mitchell Show on CNN Headline News Monday evening, Eric Lee, a student at UC Davis and a member of the International Students for Social Equality, the student organization of the Socialist Equality Party, explained the basic political issues raised by the attack.

Asked by Velez-Mitchell if he thought that UC Davis Chancellor Linda Katehi should resign, Lee responded "absolutely," but that there were much broader issues involved.

"It does go all the way to the top. It goes to Barack Obama and the two big business parties that are backing the financial class and their violent assault on peaceful protesters across the country," Lee said.

"When governments in Syria and Libya crack down on their peaceful protesters, we call for intervention. The hypocrisy of the ruling class in this country has been made so clear over the last month. What we really need is a political alternative to the two big business parties. That's why I am a member of the International Students for Social Equality."

The CNN commentator was clearly taken aback by Lee's comments, trying to cut him off, while devoting the remainder of the segment to insisting that politics was not the issue. The media, along with pro-Democratic Party organizations that have sought to influence the Occupy demonstrations, are seeking to cover-up the basic question: that the entire state apparatus is controlled by the ruling class and is dedicated to the unconditional defense of the capitalist system.

The violent crackdown, however, offers its own proof

of this fact, as well as the incompatibility of democratic rights with the enormous levels of social inequality that have become the focus of growing popular outrage in the United States.

The attack at UC Davis comes 41 years after the Kent State massacre, when four unarmed college students participating in demonstrations against the Vietnam War were murdered by members of the Ohio National Guard on May 4, 1970. The event sparked a nationwide student strike involving four million students at hundreds of schools.

The anti-Vietnam War protests had been ongoing for several years before the Kent State killings. Only two months into the Occupy protests, however, the state is responding with coordinated and escalating violence. It is only a matter of time before pepper spray and rubber bullets are replaced by more lethal methods of repression.

Thousands of students and supporters participated in demonstrations at UC Davis on Monday, voting for a boycott of classes on November 28. This is the day that the UC Regents is due to meet to approve another drastic increase in tuition that will price tens of thousands of working class students out of a decent education.

In addition to social inequality, the Davis protests have targeted soaring tuition at public universities in California. In the wake of budget cuts imposed by California's Democratic Party governor, Jerry Brown, and the state legislature, both the University of California system and the California State University system are planning fee hikes that will make a decent education unaffordable for thousands of students. Tuition in the UC system could increase as much as 81 percent over the next four years, rising to as high as \$22,000 a year.

Governor Brown has refused to comment on the police violence in Davis, and has not spoken on the violence elsewhere in California over the past month.

In an effort to contain student anger, UC Davis Chancellor Katehi announced on Monday that the university police chief had been placed on administrative leave, along with two officers involved in the incident. All of the police officials will continue to be paid. The chancellor has also announced an "investigation" into the incident, aimed at buying time.

Katehi has so far refused calls for her to step down,

telling ABC's "Good Morning America" Monday that "the university needs me." At the rally on Monday, she spoke for about one minute and said she felt "horrible" about the incident, calling for "all of the community to come together."

Meanwhile, Mark Yudof, the UC system president who is overseeing the efforts to force tuition increases, has announced an "assessment of campus police procedures." Whatever investigation is organized will be a whitewash of the responsibility of the UC administrators and big business politicians aimed at paving the way for further attacks on public education statewide.

Whatever cosmetic changes are made, the state government in Sacramento as well as the federal government in Washington is determined to press forward with the attack on the working class. Its response to the initial expressions of mass opposition to inequality and the attack on the working class through police-state measures is aimed at suppressing and criminalizing dissent.

These actions are providing millions of people with an object lesson in the nature of the state, which, as Friedrich Engels noted is, in the final analysis, a body of armed men whose task is to preserve the wealth and power of the ruling class.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact