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Toward Abolitionist Unionism: Resisting
Pandemics, Police, and Academic Austerity at
the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
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Abstract

This essay argues that abolitionist struggle is necessary to preserve academic freedom and combat the increasing austerity measures and carceral logics of the neoliberal university. Drawing on our example organizing at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, we examine how campus labor organizations like the Graduate Employees' Organization, UIUC's graduate worker union, can enact abolitionist practices of mutual aid and demands for police divestment. The union's commitment to social justice and coalitional organizing has enabled the emergence of DefundUIPD, a campus movement that stands against structures of violence like policing and for life-affirming institutions. Amid widespread academic precarity, this nationally growing movement exemplifies the radical potential of organized labor to evolve from social justice unionism to abolitionist unionism. Abolitionist unionism not only promotes a more liberatory and expansive vision of academic freedom but necessarily struggles for and against the university alongside movements for radical social change.

"Back up! Back up! We want freedom, freedom! All these racist ass cops, we don't need 'em, need 'em!" The rhythmic chant spread throughout the masked crowd of about seventy gathered outside the campus police

department in the heart of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. As the chant reached a crescendo, some began to dance, feeding off the crowd's energy and the booming "Woop! Woop!" of KRS-One's "Sound of da Police." Protesters took to the streets and marched to the University of Illinois Police Training Institute (PTI), which boasts of having "train[ed] tens of thousands of police and correctional officers" since 1955. Undercover cops surveilled the growing crowd as it descended on the PTI. Student speakers detailed their stakes in ending policing at UIUC. While they articulated distinct projects of radical social change, they were united around one goal: abolition now.

This October 1 action was organized by DefundUIPD, a coalition that emerged from the Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO) Local 6300, UIUC's graduate worker union, and brought together undergraduate and graduate students, campus workers, and community members. The rally's joyous atmosphere did not detract from the protesters' message to the UIPD: Get off our campus and out of our community. DefundUIPD coordinated the demonstration in solidarity with a national day of action mobilized by the University of California's Cops off Campus movement, which arose from the wildcat strikes by UC Santa Cruz graduate workers in 2019–20 for a cost of living adjustment (COLA), during which they faced intense police repression. Emerging from labor organizing for resource redistribution, DefundUIPD and UC Cops off Campus elucidate shared structural conditions that unite movements to abolish campus cops and to gain access to resources required for academic freedom to have meaning.

This day of action grew from the same conditions facing communities across the nation and around the globe—the execution of George Floyd by the Minneapolis police, the largest uprisings for social justice in US history, and the brutal violence police unleashed in response. On May 31, 2020, community members gathered to protest police brutality and mourn for Floyd, only to be met by Champaign cops dressed in riot gear and hurling tear gas. Police violence here is unexceptional. Just weeks prior, Urbana police battered and arrested Ale'yah Lewis, a young Black woman, and then pursued a character assassination campaign against her. The Champaign-Urbana community has long dealt with lethal police

brutality and persistent hyperpolicing of Black communities: in traffic and pedestrian stops, arrests, local incarceration rates, and trespass notices delivered by the university police. As in other large public university systems, our campus cops wield the same powers as municipal police but have an expansive jurisdiction that covers all state property and thus systematically permeates every county in Illinois.

Inspired by nationwide movements to abolish policing, DefundUIPD came together to demand that UIUC divest from institutions of violence and invest in community well-being. In a letter with nearly 2,000 signatories, we demanded that UIUC terminate collusion with all policing and militarized agencies and their corporate profiteers, dismantle the PTL, disarm UIPD, and refuse to renew UIPD contracts with the Fraternal Order of Police. As important, the letter insisted that UIUC invest in resources for students and community members—in education, mental health services, recruitment and retention of Black workers and students, and guaranteed living wages for all university workers.

Following organizers like Angela Davis, our abolitionist vision for UIUC's future not only requires "a negative process of tearing down, but it is also about building up, about creating new institutions." Our organizing prioritizes meeting human needs, especially dire at this moment of interconnected crises, by moving resources away from institutions of social control and into institutions of social good. Even as police constitute one aspect of white supremacist violence, abolition recognizes that the state systematically inflicts harm on marginalized people through racial capitalist technologies. As undergraduate DefundUIPD member Hiba states, the violence that harms communities results less from "crimes" than from the structural absence of vital, interconnected resources like healthy food, affordable housing, and medical and mental health resources. Abolition simultaneously demands ending policing but also requires transnational practices that combat white supremacy and capitalism to build the worlds we deserve. Under the neoliberal university, any meaningful commitment to academic freedom requires radical, transformative changes that address the structural foundations of its evisceration—not only the attacks on critical

scholars but also the pervasive gutting of the material resources necessary to study and teach. Put differently, a robust, rigorous academic freedom requires the changes demanded by abolitionist visions.

In what follows, we explain the formation and strategies of DefundUIPD, a coalition organizing to abolish policing at UIUC, its relationship to campus labor organizing, and its efforts to meet the crises we confront through radical analysis that, as Davis argues, “grasps things at the root” and creates transformative material change. The historical moment we face—defined by the entwined crises of white supremacy, racial capitalism, de-democratization, climate catastrophe, and a pandemic that has killed more than 3.5 million people worldwide as of this writing—requires such abolitionist transformations. By focusing on UIUC, we examine how the relationships and infrastructures built by GEO enable abolitionist organizing that works not only for conventional labor issues but also for a holistic vision of social justice. While fostering our abolitionist visions and announcing our demands, campus labor organizing has offered infrastructures that enable the realization of those radical visions into the redistribution of resources required for our community to thrive.

The Struggle So Far: Building Coalitions of Dissent

During the summer 2020 uprisings, GEO was already laying the groundwork crucial to establishing DefundUIPD. In addition to calling on our international, the American Federation of Labor–Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), to expel police unions, GEO issued a statement against police violence and anti-Blackness and endorsed the “X-Campus Statement against State Terror and Call for Termination of University-Police Ties,” signed by more than 100 groups. These tactics translated to action when GEO’s Solidarity Committee worked alongside the Champaign County Antiracist Coalition to defund the Urbana Police Department. During a June 2020 City Council budget meeting, citizens expressed outrage that 32.7 percent of discretionary funds went to policing and shared research the Solidarity Committee compiled exposing Urbana’s overinvestment in police. While the intense campaign resulted in a mere 2 percent cut to police funding, Urbana activists

continue to pressure the city council. As this effort advanced, GEO organized a series of digital and in-person actions addressing the intertwined struggles against austerity and policing. This included supporting the Strike for Black Lives, a car caravan and rally protesting UIUC's pandemic-induced austerity measures, and a dual-pronged call-in and email campaign calling on university administration to defund UIPD and demanding that Champaign County state's attorney Julia Rietz drop charges against activists brutalized by police.

GEO's collaboration with community movements extends the history of unions using their power to address structural inequalities, and this organizational cross-pollination spreads throughout UIUC. The skills, relationships, and capacity built during the summer of 2020 enabled GEO and its allies to form DefundUIPD in September. This coalition activated relationships GEO has cultivated over years with student organizations, like Students for Justice in Palestine, Black Students for Revolution, Underrepresented Minority and Muslim Advocates, and the Young Democratic Socialists of America. Groups that formed the nucleus of DefundUIPD had resolutely supported GEO during the union's successful 2018 strike. This solidarity, forged in the fires of other struggles, allowed DefundUIPD to coalesce quickly and mobilize for the October 1 action.

Building on these solidarity networks, DefundUIPD has worked to educate the public on the overlap between underpaid workers and overpoliced communities and the necessity of redistributing resources toward communal well-being. We addressed this nexus in a November 2020 teach-in on the labor movement and police unions featuring scholar-activist Theresa Rocha Beardall. Organizers reiterated how police antagonize the working class and how police union contracts, including those under negotiation with the UIPD and Urbana police, shield cops from accountability. Following the teach-in, DefundUIPD collaborated with GEO's People First, Cancel Debt Committee to administer a survey informing participants of UIUC's current budget allocations and preparing the ground for a Student Government resolution, authored by undergraduate DefundUIPD member Buthaina Hattab. The resolution

called for UIUC to reallocate 25 percent of the UIPD's budget (about \$2 million) toward resources for students, workers, and local communities through a participatory budgeting process. In March 2020, after weeks of tireless organizing, an astounding 78 percent of student voters supported the resolution. Although nonbinding, the referendum advances public education and collaborative organization and escalates pressure on UIUC, pushing policy that promotes the budget priorities of people excluded from financial decisions that affect their lives.

While making demands of the university, DefundUIPD also works outside it to create networks of care that prefigure the worlds we strive for. Working with DefundUIPD, GEO created the Cross-Campus Mutual Aid Solidarity Fund to provide material support to campus workers. As an abolitionist endeavor, mutual aid "seek[s] to radically redistribute care and well being." While helping individuals meet survival needs, mutual aid works to bring people into organizing by shedding light on interlocking systemic injustices that leave many without their basic needs met. It is an indispensable tactic in our struggles against university-fueled racial capitalism and for movement-building.

Mutual aid's foregrounding of care work and interdependent material support moves us toward a more liberatory alternative to academic freedom. Popular definitions of academic freedom recognize that economic security is "indispensable" to building higher education "for the common good." However, academic freedom must go beyond tenure, increasingly unachievable for most academic workers, to account for dramatic changes in the educational landscape wrought by neoliberalism. A liberatory alternative does not restrict academic freedom to the most privileged sectors of our workforce but instead is guided by the abolitionist principle of leaving no one behind. As such, it centers meeting people's material needs. Such an alternative to conventional notions of academic freedom fosters the relationality essential to learning and creating knowledge currently being eviscerated by the neoliberal university. It thus demands that universities use their wealth to ensure that students, workers, and community members have equitable access to material resources necessary to live, learn, and research without fear of punishment or losing the means to survive. Achieving this alternative to

academic freedom requires democratic governance that includes all members of the campus community and redistribution of the resources needed for knowledge production but withheld from the majority of university affiliates. This approach must oppose policing as an antidemocratic, exclusionary force upholding an unjust allocation of resources and instead recenter the nonhierarchical collaborations that make knowledge production meaningful.

The Crises We Face: Why Abolition in the University

Why organize for an abolitionist horizon in the university? Why are abolitionist struggles central to defending academic freedom? We understand the university as serving a specific, critical role in society—as a producer of knowledge for the common good, an educator of millions, and a potential driver of social change. Like many other research universities, UIUC connects with more than 50,000 students annually. It employs thousands of community members. Embedded in the broader social fabric, struggles for the university interweave with struggles beyond the “town-gown” divide. Efforts like DefundUIPD, GEO, and the UCSC COLA strike thus struggle within, against, and outside the university to make it fulfill its ostensible mission.

Students and workers at UIUC and beyond confront structural conditions that undergird and connect disparate university struggles—like those to abolish campus policing and to secure academic freedom. The roots of these entangled crises run deep, grounded in the neoliberal project that has not only decimated the public good but also is “built on prison foundations,” as Ruth Wilson Gilmore argues. Austerity politics have disciplined the university, starved its funding, and transformed education from a social good to private goods purchased by student-consumers, whose tuition and fees, in addition to corporate and private capital, have become essential to institutional budgets. So heavy is this reliance, financed through ballooning student and institutional debt, that most universities reopened campuses in the midst of the pandemic, leading to thousands of infections within and beyond campus. These reopenings confirm that financial security outweighs human life.

This valuing of profit over people also informs university responses to the crisis over policing. Like other institutions, UIUC has publicly decried police executions of Black people, while taking no substantive action to address its racist institutional structures, including campus cops. It has instead forestalled the demand for justice through “reformist reforms,” like police training, that give more resources, legitimacy, and power to policing agencies, despite these reforms’ decades of failure. Such defenses of campus policing emerge from the same neoliberal conditions compelling universities to rely on private capital. Securing the university as a sound site of investment are police protection of university property and the disciplining of protests. Like many other campuses, UIUC empowered the UIPD into a “full-service organization” in 1970 to contain student protests that rose up alongside global uprisings for justice. This prior historical moment of convergent crises—social revolutions and a dire recession—ushered in the neoliberal transformations the university confronts today. As noted, while divesting from public services across nearly all sectors, the policing and prisons that “discipline those left behind and suppress those who resist widening inequalities” have received investment windfalls. Campus police thus emerged with the US carceral state and serve the same function—social control targeting those most marginalized.

Unsurprisingly, universities make feeble gestures in response to the crisis of policing and the deeper crisis of white supremacy that enfolds it. UIUC, for example, has weaponized “free expression” to fire tenured professors and protect white supremacist speech, while deploying its cops against students protesting Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and racism on campus. Such hardening limits to academic freedom are not isolated to “exceptional” cases such as those of Steven Salaita and Garret Felber but have structural roots at universities. As Rachel Ida Buff suggests, austerity operates as class war by targeting departments for reduction, limiting access to education, and curtailing academic freedom along race, class, and gender lines. As noted, these austerity politics that decimate the material foundations of academic freedom coincide with increasing investments in the policing tasked with controlling this

inequitable social order, often targeting the very people on the losing end of university budgets.

The examples from our campus and others show that academic freedom means nothing when considered in isolation from the surrounding social fabric. In its thinnest conception—as a professional right necessary to produce knowledge—academic freedom cannot be secured even for the relatively few tenured professors at research universities. It reifies the exceptional, rights-enabled individual at the expense of the collaborative knowledge production that makes academic labor possible in the first place. Given the dire economic crisis tied to the pandemic, academic freedom risks further gutting, as seen in the Kansas Board of Regents’ policy empowering university administrators to “suspend, dismiss or terminate employees,” which according to the AAUP “will eviscerate . . . academic freedom and shared governance.” Furthermore, emboldened by revanchist conditions of Donald Trump’s presidency that persist beyond his reelection defeat, some states are proposing laws to eliminate education that promotes “social justice.” Defending academic freedom will require connecting it to broader freedom struggles, including those efforts to dismantle the policing that enforces austerity, protects profits over people, and drains community resources.

Moments of crisis—when the social order can no longer maintain existing social conditions—“can be used as an opportunity rather than a constraint.” As Gilmore argues, crisis “signals systemic change whose outcome is determined through struggle.” Within the university, DefundUIPD is organizing to confront the demands of the moment and bend the outcome of this crisis toward greater investment in the social good and away from institutions of violence. As the region’s primary employer and largest institution, UIUC maintains outsized power, which means it also presents opportunities to generate meaningful change that spreads beyond campus. Therefore, our definition of academic freedom does not stop at the campus borders but is fought for in concert with broader freedom struggles. Our vision of liberation encompasses and surpasses the academy, with a goal of forming a reciprocal, equitable, and

nonextractive relationship between the university and the surrounding community. Just as the UIPD's jurisdiction exceeds campus boundaries, the effort to abolish policing at the university has never focused on campus cops alone but seeks to compel the institution to distribute its resources for people's well-being. Because the goals of abolition address the root causes of the multiple crises we face, it aligns with the goals of social justice union organizing. DefundUIPD has relied on its working relationship with GEO to support its work; and, as detailed below, abolitionist principles, in turn, are influencing the direction of the union.

How We Confront the Crises: GEO and Social Justice Unionism

Over the past twenty-five years, GEO has created an organizing infrastructure that reaches beyond narrowly defined working conditions toward more expansive goals that redefine the workplace—an approach to labor organizing known as “social justice unionism.” From this infrastructure DefundUIPD emerged as a working group of GEO. Along with logistics and material resources, GEO offers DefundUIPD robust strengths in organizing people into movements, mobilizing campaigns, and developing movement-building skills. Organizing involves building relationships, often starting with the well-known tactic of “one-on-ones”—conversations where organizers listen to their coworkers' concerns, agitate on those issues to activate workers as union participants, and bring workers together to address those issues through campaigns. Mobilizing entails bringing large numbers of people together to support a particular campaign. The two frequently overlap; mobilizations help build relationships and mutual aid, and organizing marshals the high participation necessary for successful mobilizations. The most powerful weapon GEO workers wield is the strike, which requires persistent organizing, mobilizing, and leadership. In 2018, under the slogan #EducationForAll, GEO went on strike for twelve days for guaranteed tuition waivers, increased wages, health insurance, immigration leave, and more. For DefundUIPD, the strike is the ultimate tool in our repertoire if we do not achieve our goal of defunding police through other means.

As noted above, GEO and DefundUIPD maintain a reciprocal relationship. As GEO fosters and supports DefundUIPD's work, DefundUIPD has informed GEO's work in abolitionist terms. While some GEO members already support abolitionist goals like eliminating police and other harmful institutions, we continue to organize for abolition across our membership, which spans more than 3,000 graduate workers with varied political beliefs. We hold open conversations about abolition and how it relates to the everyday lives of graduate workers by connecting efforts to defund campus police to our "People's Budget" campaign that would grant UIUC students and workers decision-making power over campus spending, an example of academic freedom in practice. As an intergenerational group, DefundUIPD fortifies GEO's sustained organizing and leadership development and opens new horizons of organizing by creating a different universe of solidarity between and among groups.

Our abolitionist praxis is also inspired by other graduate unions' approaches to abolitionist unionism at institutions such as Yale, the University of Pennsylvania, and Oregon State University. The abolitionist strike by the University of Michigan's GEO 3550 in the fall of 2020 crucially connected the safe working conditions of campus workers—in the face of COVID-19—to demands for a "demilitarized workplace," free from Ann Arbor police and ICE. As Charlotte Rosen and Eli B. Lichtenstein state, "Abolition is a necessary step in protecting . . . workers at their workplaces," due to the violence of policing and racial capitalism in university settings. Because policing is a labor issue, we look to another example, UCSC's wildcat strike, which launched both the COLA movement and UC Cops off Campus and thus connects police abolition to the need for living wages.

Our conception of abolitionist unionism also draws strength from struggles outside the university. Strikes by the Chicago Teachers' Union in 2012 and 2019, United Teachers of Los Angeles in 2019, and West Virginia, Arizona, Oklahoma, North Carolina, Colorado, and Kentucky teachers in 2018 stretched beyond narrow definitions of working conditions to include demands like charter caps to prevent privatization;

greater resources for Black and Latino/a/x youth, like nurses, counselors, and green space in schools; affordable housing; an end to racial profiling through “random” searches; and barring ICE agents from schools. This wider understanding of working conditions also emerged in one-day strikes by Fight for \$15 fast food workers in a Strike for Black Lives and the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, in which dockworkers shut down twenty-nine West Coast ports for eight hours on June 19, 2020, to honor Juneteenth and protest the murder of George Floyd, understanding that “the most effective way to stop police terror is by the working class taking action at the point of production.” Only through acting in solidarity with these efforts can we continue to pursue abolitionist visions of labor.

The Work Ahead: The Future of University Labor against Policing

The future seems more uncertain than ever. However, if we understand these times as the convergence of racial capitalism, austerity, and the unfettered rise of white nationalism in the United States, our goals become clearer. As DefundUIPD’s membership grows beyond GEO, we seek to strengthen solidarities across campus boundaries. To fortify these bonds, we created overlapping, collaborative subgroups: research and political education, mutual aid, publicity and social media, and outreach. Still, we face tremendous challenges in the coming years. Joe Biden, who coauthored the infamous 1994 Crime Bill that fed mass incarceration, supports investing in policing and militarization alongside practicing austerity and organized abandonment. On campuses, the historic fall 2020 abolitionist strike at the University of Michigan shows that the neoliberal university will deploy retaliatory legal action through courts alongside symbolic concessions to squash radical demands. The administration responded by forming another toothless task force, which only “work[s] to sustain and re-legitimize police power while extending the parameters of policing.” As universities dedicate themselves to “reformist reforms” that preserve the status quo, DefundUIPD and the Cops off Campus Coalition remain committed to using all available tools, including labor organizing.

DefundUIPD is already opposing such symbolic concessions. Since beginning her tenure in the summer of 2020, UIPD chief Alice Cary has opposed our demands, reflecting UIUC's administration. Students recently rallied around improving campus mental health resources, expressing grief over Trevor Till, a freshman living with depression who died by suicide in campus housing in October 2020. The university has yet to acknowledge Till's death by name. Its dismissive response claims, "The wellbeing of our students is our number one priority," while refusing to materially demonstrate this priority. DefundUIPD demands that the university shift money from policing to its overextended counseling center and make its services more equitable by hiring multilingual and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) counselors. However, the administration has funneled even more money into "kinder" policing that hires mental health professionals only to have them collude with cops. UIPD's new Community Outreach and Support Team (COAST) includes hires for social workers who respond to crisis calls with cops. These "corresponder" models do not reduce violent encounters with people in mental health crises. DefundUIPD condemns this effort to absorb mental health care into policing, which deflects demands for greater investment in holistic wellness, while expanding the legitimacy and resources of an inherently violent institution. UIPD's deputization of Champaign County residents through the Citizen Police Academy and undergraduate students through the Student Patrol makes our fight to envision new forms of justice even more urgent.

We seek alternatives that meet our communities' needs without legitimizing policing. One core demand is to create a transformative justice center that would "address conflict and harm without relying on police and punishment, but instead focus on accountability, redress, and healing." The concept of transformative justice, which disability justice organizer Mia Mingus defines as a way to "respond to violence without creating more violence" drives us to disempower agencies of punishment and transform the root causes of harm. The university offers existing resources, physical infrastructure, and a shifting population where we can experiment with transformative justice practices that thousands of

students and workers can utilize long after their time at UIUC. The university is a fitting site to institute such practices because it is embedded in the larger social world and fosters commitments to group accountability, a liberatory approach to academic freedom that depends on mutual cooperation. Our vision of academic freedom rejects a carceral approach in which counselors and social workers operate like and collaborate with police. Instead, we embrace a transformative justice framework where our campus mental health support system would center healing and accountability, not punishment. Cary has publicly stated that she supports exploring transformative justice approaches on campus, making her position as UIPD chief obsolete by crafting new relationships that nurture rather than police.

Abolitionist projects on college campuses do not just fight the police but also resist the carceral imperatives of university administrations, which work alongside campus police forces, making the university a critical terrain of struggle. Many universities' unethical handling of the global pandemic demonstrates that their profit motives are rooted in exploiting their most vulnerable students and staff—often working-class people of color. The conditions for academic freedom within the neoliberal university will become more hostile as it demands ever-greater extraction of labor from effectively silenced, disciplined subjects. When universities prioritize financial gain over their mission to serve communities, they discourage principled refusal and alternative pedagogies that stand in the way. Therefore, we continue to fight against these violences within the university and build structures of support outside its ivory tower. Our struggle against policing on campus draws on a long tradition of abolitionist organizing as the only way for us to get free.

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