

Five Axioms for Action at UC Davis

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Some thorny issues have come up during the recent and astonishing wave of student and worker actions in the UC system and beyond, in the face of a barefaced and intolerable privatization program conducted via the pretext of economic crisis. They are issues both of theory and of political strategy, and I do not claim to have any final answers. But I think these issues, and there are five I want to touch on, can be addressed — and can be addressed at a strategic level, distilled down to some basic axioms. The issues on my mind are, basically, these: the matter of dialogue and conversation; the matter of demands and negotiations; the matter of the police; the matter of the role of faculty in this movement; and the matter of speech itself.

Dialogue & Conversation

We have learned to respond almost automatically to the virtue of “dialogue” and “conversation,” as if each of us had a magnet inside that was inevitably drawn to such things, exactly as if they were things and not tactics. It is similar to how we are trained to respond to “democracy,” as if “democracy” as it really exists in our lives was an unquestionable good. But as someone remarked ruefully in the paddy wagon on November 19th, “this is what democracy looks like, too.”

Trapped in the quicksand of Chancellor’s talks and Commission meetings, we remember that this is what dialogue and conversation look like, too. They are tactics and they are words — they are always capable of being double agents, of working for either side. One should be thoughtful about how these words and tactics work in our specific situation. “Dialogue” and “conversation,” I mean to say, do not have internal characteristics. They are tools, and they often serve those in power. In the last couple weeks we have seen this most clearly. We call for an apology; we are offered a review. We call for charges to be dropped; we are told that somebody will talk to somebody else. We call for an end to the privatization programs; we are offered some sort of forum where all questions will be answered — as if the problem for a laid-off groundskeeper, or a family priced out of education, is that certain questions haven’t been answered. As if there was an explaining problem here, and not a problem of privatization, indifference, and greed.

The administration’s calls for dialogue and conversation have only meant the following:

1. do not act
2. we will be substituting speech for action at every turn for the foreseeable future
3. please leave now

4. and also, please send us back some representatives, you know, later, for further empty chitchat; abandon your solidarity, your unity and your political form; reform yourselves along the administrative and bureaucratic lines we prefer and recognize, and we will be happy to talk to you then, because
5. we are condescending, patronizing bureaucrats and that's how we roll.

Now, I am all for talk. We should talk to each other, as much as we can bear. Not to stop things from happening, but to make them happen — because we can. We should talk on our way to living our shared commitments.

At the same time it has become clear that the only form of communication that we have at our disposal that the administration will hear is action itself. So the deferral of action is a kind of silencing. And if talk substitutes for or defers action, it has to be understood in those terms. That is the most basic code of this particular situation, and I think it can be distilled down to this first axiom: **Every offer of dialogue and discussion from the administration is a strategy for silencing us, and should be recognized as such.**

Demands & Negotiations

Last Tuesday in Mrak Hall we made demands, and negotiated, and I think this was important. We stood up for folks who had risked and endured arrest, and this is a crucial form of solidarity. We should be proud of that. But it was a small victory on treacherous terrain. The terrain of demands and negotiations is one that they prefer. It divides us, because we do not all have the same demands. It gets us in the habit of making concessions, when we should be forming the habit of taking what is rightfully ours. It sucks the energy from political life with the vampiric quality that is always the nature of power, power which must exploit the energy of workers and students to perpetuate itself.

It is hard to blame them for pursuing this most obvious strategy. We must look to ourselves on this score. We have no right to chant “Whose university? Our university!” if we don't mean it. You can't really say “Whose house? Our house! Can I have a cookie?” If it's your house, it's your cookie. If we really mean that it is “our university,” we should not be asking and we should not be negotiating. If we accept the idea that we can only win concessions, special and temporary dispensations, then we are accepting that it is their university; that any gains are given, and may be taken back. I guarantee this: if you win a 32% fee rollback but don't free the university from its program of privatization, the fees will go up double that by the time your brothers and sisters graduate. If you gain a budget increase from Sacramento and don't take control of the University's direction, that budget increase will be spent on privatizing more, not less. If we believe it is our university, we should be asking for nothing, and taking nothing less than the university itself.

But I also understand that people feel like there is no coherence and no legitimacy without demands. I'm just a poet, so I'm not sure what's so great about coherence and legitimacy. But let's discuss this seriously as a strategic matter. I do not think we can make thirty demands at once. I do not think we can make three demands at once. Emphasize one at once. Here's why: because, as we learned last week, if you make three demands at once, they will disappear; cops in tactical gear will hide themselves in a stairwell, and they will come back and offer some version of “we'll offer you half of number one, three-sevenths of number two, and some weird fucked up

version of number three, plus let's have a nice dialogue next week." And then you find yourself saying "um, should we ask for three-quarters of one, five-sevenths of two, and what was number three again?" and there are the cops in tactical gear helping you decide.

This process is demoralizing, it pits us against one another, it renders the struggle as a matter of individual interests rather than collective rightness. And perhaps most important at a strategic level, it forces us to give up certain things we don't want or need to give up, half of this for a third of that for two-elevenths of that and suddenly a bunch of stuff has been let go. So again I think I can distill this down to a basic strategic axiom. But first let me be clear about what I am not saying. I'm not saying we can't have three demands, or thirty. I'm saying it doesn't work to make them all at once. My axiom is very simple, and I hope it will make sense: **One action, one demand.** This avoids the problem of trying to represent a bunch of disparate interests in a messy bunch, and avoids being in a situation where you have to choose between someone's demands and someone else. **One action, one demand.** You walk into a building, and the people who go in demand that there be no furloughs for any Bracket One workers — that's under 40,000/year. You don't demand a conversation. Conversation is silencing. **One action, one demand;** one demand that must be met by action from the administration.

The Police

For this process to be carried out in good faith, it cannot be a situation of threat. These negotiations cannot be carried out in the presence of armed cops: not visible and not hidden, not at five yards and not at 150 yards.

The police lines that were set up at Mrak on November 19th, the barricades that were set up at Berkeley the next day, were perfectly descriptive of a far more longstanding situation. Two weeks ago I spoke of an us and a them — I tried to clarify that for all the nuance of this situation, there truly was a basic antagonism between those who wished to privatize our education and our lives, and those who refused this. This is the line for our struggle: private and enclosed, public and open. And the police line is the exact same line. Cops may not wish to be there any more than you wish to be participating in this struggle, but they are being paid to make sure that what is private stays private, to make sure that the line stays there, and that you can't challenge it, that you are always under threat. The administration will talk until everyone passes out from boredom, but if you say just once **no**, we won't leave this building, it's ours and not yours — even if you pose no threat, are unarmed, peaceful, well-mannered and polite — then you get a police line. Because the police aren't there to keep the peace; nobody doubts that police add violence and danger to protests. Police are there to make sure that the distinction between ours and theirs remains clear and impassable. So when you challenge that line, you get a police line. You get arrests. You get a 90-pound woman thrown down by four cops on the hood of a car. You get a militarized campus with seven police forces and batons and guns and dogs and a motherfucking helicopter. You get 30,000 more troops being sent to Afghanistan while your fees go up 32% and they lay off workers. Privatization and militarization are two sides of a single sheet of paper, and that paper is the contract that wants to buy and sell you, and to intimidate you into putting up with it. So that brings me to the third axiom: the police line and the line of privatization that excludes you are the same line. One is an image of the other. If you want to fight privatization — if you want to even preserve that as a possibility — it begins with the non-negotiable demand:

Cops off campus. If it were up to me to choose the first demand going forward from today, my own proposal for its one demand would be that: **Cops off campus.** No dialogue or conversation before that happens; it's a precondition. **Cops off campus.** Otherwise there is no point in making other demands, as we will be threatened and harassed and beaten before we can achieve them. **Cops off campus** or we are already silenced.

The Role of Faculty

It's tempting to say, faculty off campus too! In their own way — see notes on dialogue and conversation, above — faculty have effectively been silencing students: by talking at them, by trying to take them gently by the shoulder and lead them to sweet reason, away from the action that is manifestly necessary. It is disappointing to see faculty refusing to commit to action, deflecting the struggle to Sacramento — anywhere but my campus, please! — to see them misrecognizing the principle of solidarity.

I see three possible roles for the faculty, and none of them involves telling students how they should comport themselves, none of them involves derailing the momentum of this movement even with the best intentions. I think faculty can stand with the students and other workers and when I say “stand,” I mean sit with them and link arms when necessary, out of a commitment to solidarity — out of shared struggle, and as comrades, not as bosses. I think faculty can use their privilege to push as hard as they can against the administration and their cops, can tell them how to comport themselves, and thus try to create as much space as possible for students and workers to organize themselves autonomously. Or they can not interfere, if they can't see that this struggle is their own and that it will be fought by acting, rather than saying stuff. You have figured this out before the faculty, which is greatly to your credit. A fourth axiom, to my colleagues: **Faculty: stand with students, push back against the administration, or get the hell out of the way.**

Who Speaks?

The last matter, which in certain ways includes all the previous matters, is the one of speech, of who speaks. We have been invited to speak repeatedly, this last week and the week before and the month before. Every Regents' meeting invites you to speak. Every Chancellor, every Commission. The evidence, and there is a huge amount of evidence, tells us that among the possible outcomes when people speak at these invited events, the least likely outcome is a reversal of fee hikes, layoffs, privatization. This outcome is considerably less likely than getting arrested or tazed, a conclusion based on actual evidence. And of course the more likely outcome still, by far, is that you will be condescendingly ignored.

There is no free speech with cops there, there is no free speech when it is predecided that no one will listen, and what you can and can't say. You are not really allowed to speak, except for that speech which is a form of silence, the speech that agrees not to take action. That is presented as the only option, but it is not in fact the situation. The situation is this: you do not need a place and time dictated to you, and require no invitation. You can say **no**, we have other things on our agenda today. You can speak with your actions. You can choose where you wish to speak from, and make them come to you. We have learned that they will.

The President speaks, the Commission speaks, and the Chancellor speaks, and they will say petty and dishonest things wrapped in the language of democracy and hope, dialogue and necessity. And when you challenge this story with real facts and real necessity on your side, you will be ignored. And when you challenge it with action, you will be told about rules and regulations. Unless you say Yes to showing up at an appointed place and time, with an invitation, you will be silenced.

But history speaks too. History speaks from Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955. History speaks from the Stonewall Inn in 1969. History speaks from Argentina in 2001, when workers occupied factories that increasingly exploited them, and made them their own, deprivatized them. There were rules and regulations in each of these places. Each situation had its Chancellors and Commissions for the Future and its Linda Katehi and Janet Gong and its cops. History spoke anyway. Or, rather, people spoke and made their own history, even in conditions designed to dissuade them from intervening in it. They said **no**. In the face of this I say, and this is my last axiom, **History is made by those who say no**

We spoke, we began to speak, when we linked arms at Mrak Hall. We began to say **no**. We were not the first, not here at UC Davis or elsewhere, and we certainly won't be the last.

But, you will say, is it not outrageous to compare a campus struggle to the Civil Rights movement, to the Gay Rights movement, to the Worker's Occupation movement? Maybe so. But I looked around Mrak Hall a couple times, and I saw many people of color, many queer folks, many folks who work. We share a life with those movements, and we share an obligation to them. I believe that obligation is to recognize that our struggle is continuous with theirs, and to act on that recognition. To know that we are not just about fee hikes, or tax codes. Those matter. But if they are our entire concern, I don't think we have a right to invoke such histories of struggle, even as they speak to us.

Our obligation, if we wish to be in dialogue with those traditions — for is that not the only dialogue we really want? — is to act so as to change the most basic structures, the ones that thrive on our division, that thrive on parceling out a little bit here and a little bit there just to take it back next week or next year. Our obligation is to act so as to change the most basic structures, the ones that like to make lines of exclusion, police lines, lines of privatization. It is these to which we must say **no**, and we must do this together. This is our minimum obligation to other struggles against a dominated life, and our minimum obligation to ourselves.

I think it is time for all of us to speak now, in the kind of speech that can be heard, that doesn't require an invitation, that doesn't go to them but insists they come to us, if they would like to be part of the history we are making. I invite them to do so, to be on the right side of history, the right side of the police line. They are many. We are many more.

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