

AT THE

SIX REFLECTIONS ON AN
ABOLITIONIST STRIKE AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

Printed by True Leap Press
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P.O. Box #409216
Chicago, IL 60640

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Six Reflections on an Abolitionist Strike at the University of Michigan

by **BLACK INK**

IN THIS PIECE, AN ANONYMOUS ABOLITIONIST IN SO-CALLED ANN ARBOR PRESENTS SIX REFLECTIONS ON THE FALLOUT OF THE GEO 3550 STRIKE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN, ANN ARBOR. AFTER A WEEK AND A HALF OF STRIKE ACTIONS, AND NATION-WIDE ATTENTION ON THE DEMANDS FOR A DEMILITARIZED CAMPUS, IT BECAME CLEAR THAT WHAT IS NEEDED IS NOT ONLY THE ABOLITION OF THE POLICE/POLICING BUT OF THE UNIVERSITY AS IT CURRENTLY EXISTS.

the city of Detroit as a “learning lab.” It requires that John Seto be fired and run out of Ann Arbor for his role in protecting Aura Rosser’s murderer, David Ried. It requires an interrogation of local economic dependence on the university, especially in relation to the sports industry. The abolition of the university is also the abolition of the college town.

6) Abolition blooms outside the university, not at the bargaining table.

The university is both the end and the beginning of abolition. Even as the abolitionist strike was kettled into a task force on campus policing by university peace police, the university is still a site of new encounters and new alliances, where new and surprising accomplices can be found. The university as it currently exists is not an abolitionist institution, and no set of demands, when fully implemented, will allow the university to exist in its current form. A world without policing and prisons is necessarily a world without the university. What can grow from the ashes of an anti-Black, settler colonial, and extractive institution like the University of Michigan? What can bloom?

and actions, certain actors inadvertently articulated their alliance to the university as it is, rather than fighting to create the university as we imagine it could be. Autonomous actions taken by individuals do not and have not needed approval from any bureaucrats. Instead, our solidarity and the impact of such an abolitionist strike, with such unrealistic demands, are derived from a recognition and celebration of a diversity of tactics and targets. An abolitionist strike needs to be dynamic and impossible to pin down, and needs to attack multiple targets so that actors within existing power structures do not know where to turn.

5) The abolitionist strike necessitates coalitions not limited to the boundaries of the university, and requires solidarity beyond university workers and students.

GEO recognized its own bargaining power within the university to negotiate for “safe and just campus for all,” but was perhaps late to recognize that their demands would have ramifications beyond the campus itself. To the surprise of nobody, the anti-policing demands and the framing of the abolitionist strike resonated the loudest with people around and outside of the University of Michigan. The abolitionist strike required teach-ins on freedom movements in Washtenaw County and southeastern Michigan, which offered a space to build connections with local configurations of autonomists, PIC abolitionists, immigrants rights activists, and educators alike. The desire and work to transform the university requires a reckoning with the way that the university, a site of struggle and a site of exploitation, has displaced Black and indigenous people from so-called Ann Arbor, and played an active role in Ann Arbor’s housing crisis and the ongoing gentrification of Ypsilanti. It requires an end to the extractive and neocolonial relationship that UM has to

1) Contractual demands can and should demand the impossible, and the demands of abolition will always exceed the capacities of a union and therefore all parameters of negotiation.

Both within and outside of the frameworks of “permissive” bargaining, the desire and urgency to create a world centered around care cannot be granted by a university or union bureaucracy. Throughout the GEO strike, GEO’s demands, and especially the anti-policing demands, were criticized for their “impossibility.” It was impossible for a graduate workers union to demand cuts to a campus police budget, it was impossible to negotiate over campus police’s role in making workplaces unsafe, it was impossible to ask a university to cut ties with local police and Immigrations and Customs Enforcement. While some on strike chose to meet those criticisms with well-rehearsed and well-researched responses, others urged our naysayers to answer for those criticisms themselves. However, rather than understanding the demands solely as a baseline to negotiate from, the openness of the demands—to cease purchasing discounted military equipment, to disarm campus police, to cut their budget by 50%, to demand transparency—allowed graduate workers, undergraduates, staff, faculty, and community members to imagine what a cop-free campus might look like. The anti-policing demands, when followed through to their logical conclusions, began to open possibilities for a university that is completely unrecognizable and fundamentally different, perhaps not a university at all.

2) Coalitions within university actors are always bound and mediated by the power relationships of the university.

Within the boundaries of a work stoppage, alliances

between undergraduates, graduate workers, faculty, staff, and construction workers are necessary for the success of the strike. However, the introduction of abolitionist demands and non-reformist reforms, as well as the tactics and actions proposed to achieve these demands, soon became a point of tension. Tensions always exist within coalitions, but these tensions articulated themselves through “peace police”-like denunciations of a march to a Dean’s house, and a temporary street blockade from faculty, administration, and even fellow GEO members alike. Tensions arose in the conversations between construction workers and graduate workers on the GEO picket lines, with the result that the pickets were mischaracterized as “protests.” And, predictably, some undergraduates and their parents accused GEO of seeking to further disrupt a school year made more challenging by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, coalitions between entities supporting the strike can offer spaces for connection between individual actors, even as they act as machines of containment that impede the autonomous formations necessary to escalate a strike.

3) A cop-free campus is also a campus without deans, without provosts, without presidents.

There are police on campus, and they don’t just have weapons. They have doctoral degrees, six-figure salaries, and dean/provost positions. One of the preconditions to the death blows to the GEO strike was the refusal to view university administration, HR, and deans as not only entwined with campus police but part of the policing apparatus. Just as we know that there can be no good-faith bargaining with cops, there are no good-faith criticisms from cops. An analysis of power within the university and the union in relation to the university must reckon with the ways that administrators rely on campus police to enforce order and maintain

control over the physical campus space. From the everyday issue of trespass tickets to those who do not fit the profile of “student,” to the threat of arrest after the university issued an injunction and restraining order against elected union leaders, the police and their power infected every aspect of the strike—even as striking graduate workers directly oriented their demands against the police. This analysis of power within the university must also reckon with the ways that faculty can easily fill the roles of cops on campus (through inaction, lack of support, or even outright hostility not limited to retaliating against graduate workers or gleefully bragging about crossing the picket line) even as non-tenured professors, adjuncts, and lecturers face a level of scrutiny, precarity, and retaliation not shared with their tenured colleagues. Faculty can simultaneously peace police the strike and each other, and are also not immune from the violence inherent to a campus with police, deans, provosts, and presidents.

4) The tactics of the abolitionist strike will necessarily clash with the tactics greenlit by a union.

Just as the demands of the abolitionist strike disarticulated the conflation of security and safety, the tactics of the strike refused singular, limited definitions of “risk.” When fear of retaliation blocks the ability to act with spontaneity or calculated risk, the strike is dead before it begins. Throughout the leadup to the strike, fears of retaliation and repression actively impeded planning and strategizing for causing the most disruption to campus operations. Even as GEO seriously fought for and continually affirmed the importance of the anti-policing demands, and indeed the importance of an abolitionist strike, membership began to act in ways that mirrored the dynamics of the very entities they were seeking to abolish. In denouncing particular tactics