

Lessons on Taking the School

A communiqué from the occupation of Siemens Hall.
With lessons from students taking direct action in
solidarity with Palestine.

WITH PALESTINE

RIVER TO SEA

FREE GAZA

On April 22, 2024, inspired by the resilience of the Gaza solidarity encampment at Columbia University and other demonstrations around the country, students at Cal Poly Humboldt campus in Arcata, California occupied a building in solidarity with Palestinians, precipitating a showdown with police from throughout the region. In the following report, participants in the occupation describe what took place and what they learned.

This represented a significant escalation in the current wave of student demonstrations in solidarity with Palestine. As the local organization Humboldt for Palestine announced, “this was not a protest organized by Humboldt for Palestine, but an organic CPH student organizing movement.”

After an hours-long standoff, local media reported that the police were forced to withdraw:

10:50 pm: All law enforcement have left from in front of the building and appear to be leaving the campus. Scanner traffic appears to confirm that law enforcement has left the scene. One officer said that law enforcement is being “disbanded.” Students are currently pouring in and out of the occupied building.

Report from within the Cal Poly Humboldt Occupation

On Monday, April 22, a group of 45 students, alumni, and community members occupied Siemens Hall on the Cal Poly Humboldt Campus in the far northern coast of California in solidarity with those facing genocide in Gaza.

Within an hour, campus police attempted to negotiate with the occupiers, who stood strong and refused to exit the building. Soon after, police from every department in the county showed up—including a helicopter, K-9 units, and off-duty police. Students responded by swarming them.

The cops’ initial plan to carry out a mass arrest was thwarted by a series of clashes both inside and outside the building. The occupiers beat back police advances, despite facing brutality unlike anything we have seen over the last decade of struggle in Humboldt County. It is important to note that the police used both batons and shields as weapons to brutalize protesters; in the hands of police, any tool is a weapon.

Police arrested two people and dragged them out of the building by their hair; they inflicted multiple cranial lacerations on another person, necessitating a trip to the hospital and several staples. Many more people were left with head injuries and at least one with a concussion.

During the clashes, police drove a university truck into the crowd, pushing protestors toward the riot line. Yet despite this brutality, it became increasingly apparent that the police were completely unprepared to face down the ferocity and intelligence of the student occupiers. The police were physically repelled from Siemens Hall and massive barricades were erected out of objects from within the building including chairs, desks, trash cans, and doors that had been removed from their hinges.

The police surrounded the occupied building, and a large crowd of students, faculty, and other community members surrounded them, chanting “De-escalate by leaving!” and “People power! We are stronger!” among other chants.

After a six-hour standoff, the police packed up and went home. Hundreds of students rushed into the building and joyously embraced occupiers. The police-imposed division collapsed and we achieved the upper hand. The university has declared a three day lock down. For us, this is only the beginning.

This communiqué comes from within the occupation. We would like to pass on a number of lessons that we have learned.

1. Out of the quads, into the buildings.

It’s clear that in order for this crisis to develop further, student occupations should take buildings whenever possible. The first action of the police was to instruct the occupiers to move to the quad. In saying this, they showed that we can wield the most power by occupying the spaces where classes are held and administrators have offices. In addition, buildings on campus are filled with everything you might need to construct barricades and protect an occupation.

2. If you build it, they will come.

It only took a small number of students to occupy Siemens Hall. Don’t be afraid to hold your ground. This movement is strong. Seemingly out of nowhere, hundreds if not thousands will come to support you. Importantly, outside crowds were able to impede the police by dividing their attention. The cops found themselves kettled and completely unsure of where to turn. Someone set up a barbecue—free hotdogs fueled the crowd.

3. The pro-Palestinian movement must be a movement against the police.

At every step, police will not hesitate to brutalize those who call for an end to genocide in Palestine. In Gaza, Palestinians face the Israeli military; in the United States, we face the police. We must recognize that these forces are one and the same: they are all foot soldiers of empire.

4. Listen! organizer.

We need not wait for the permission of professional activists to set the terms of struggle. Student occupiers acted decisively to take the building without the backing of any established organizations. Collectively, we found we had the skills, experience, and creativity needed to carry out our action. While student organizations often recommend starting with a list of achievable demands and entering into endless negotiations with administrators, our occupation held one demand for six hours: that the police leave campus.

5. Be prepared.

Our town is somewhat sleepy. We underestimated the scale of police repression we would face. Four years after the George Floyd Uprising, we should heed its lessons. It is best to come to all demonstrations with goggles, gas masks, laser pointers, and shields. You never know what a casual sleepover might become.