

Labor and Social Justice against the Colonial University

A Union for Radical Solidarity

Executive Committee of Academic Labor United

This violence is being perpetrated by our boss, David Lassner. Together, we have the power, knowledge, and solidarity to find another way forward. We must be a union that will always stand up for our fellow workers, and never stand with a boss that routinely disregards our dignity, futures, and now physical safety. An injury to one is an injury to all.

Benton Rodden, former ALU Chair

Aloha kākou. We are members of Academic Labor United (ALU), a graduate student committee organizing for graduate assistant (GA) unionization at the University of Hawai‘i. We invite you to envision with us a coalitional labor and social justice movement that reaches across Hawai‘i Pae ‘Āina and the boundaries that imperialism has forced between our bodies, and that strives towards transformational labor power and radical solidarity.

ALU formed in 2017 in response to the university administration’s continued and active exploitation of vulnerable student workers. As the discrepancy between our wages and cost of living continues to grow, the UH administration is increasing its reliance on our cheap labor for teaching, research, and administrative work. For years, they have not intervened in cases of exploitive supervisors abusing graduate workers. Trying to wait survivors out, bureaucratic inefficiencies stall grievances for months. And even though public sector workers won the rights to strike and bargain collectively in the 1970s, the State of Hawai‘i and UH are denying GAs these same rights.

Efforts at GA unionization in Hawai‘i have been years in the making. In fact, our cause has a genealogy stretching back nearly two centuries. While many believe the earliest Hawai‘i labor action was a Kanaka Maoli worker walkout at the Kōloa sugar plantation in 1841, Kanaka Maoli students working the printing press at Lahainaluna school struck for higher wages in January of 1839. That school’s post-secondary program anticipated the University of Hawai‘i.

True to its foundations as a missionary school, UH is deeply rooted in histories of settler colonialism, militarism, and capitalism. The flagship campus sits on “ceded lands,” the term the US State of Hawai‘i uses for those lands seized from the Kingdom of Hawai‘i after the illegal overthrow by American businessmen and military in 1893. At the summit of Mauna a Wākea, the UH-managed Mauna Kea Observatories, slated for a massive thirteenth telescope complex despite decades of opposition from the Kanaka Maoli community, also rest on “ceded lands.” Written by our then-chair on the day that the kūpuna protecting Maunakea were arrested, this essay’s epigraph provoked vocal opposition and silent resentment from parts of our own membership. While many of our leaders and organizers, past, present, and future, Kānaka Maoli and settlers alike, put their bodies between the mauna and a heavily militarized police force, some of our membership benefit academically and professionally from summit telescope development. Like many Hawai‘i labor unions, composed of workers in tourism, development, education, and so on, we wrestle with our need for economic security as exploited workers, and our complicity with our workplace’s settler colonial violence. At Pu‘uhuluhulu, however, the UH administration unmistakably participated in capitalist class traditions of employing the police as a private security force against its own workers, and the colonial higher education tradition of inflicting violence on Native bodies to advance research objectives. Also tools of the brutal US imperialism regime, these actions are inseparable.

As a unionization organizing committee, we believe that labor struggle is essential to our collective liberation, and that social justice movements must address labor to win the radical change they seek. The move away from considering labor as essential to social justice work over the past few decades is understandable. Business model unionism, where representatives act as third-party negotiators between bosses and workers, is not advocacy for workers’ rights, but a concession of workers’ agency. This model has neutered workers’ power and bred working class mistrust.

ALU is organizing a union run by workers, fighting for and uplifting our comrades—solidarity, whose central message, coined by the earlier labor movement, is that “an injury to one is an injury to all.” Although critical theorists have armed us with the tools to see our individual oppressions as intersecting, the basic principle has not changed. ALU and all unions are workers collectives, including every worker. In violent struggles such as protecting Maunakea, as an organization ALU is therefore not an ally. That would imply that ALU’s struggle is not a direct struggle against settler colonialism. Such a stance would however erase our Kanaka Maoli members. Because we cannot be free until they are free, we stand in *solidarity* with kia‘i mauna, as we do with Black Lives Matter, because our members are Black as well. Or as ALU comrade Joy Enomoto says, “Black lives matter in the Hawaiian Kingdom.”

As labor organizers, we must return to the movement's radical roots. As social justice organizers, we must include labor once more as a central piece of our collective movement. If imperialism exploits labor to extract resources from stolen Indigenous lands and convert it into capital, fighting this system demands that you either take control of the land, as was done on Kaho'olawe or Maunakea, or withhold your labor. If ALU had been organized enough to strike in solidarity with our Kanaka Maoli comrades during the 2019 standoff on the Ala Hulu Kūpuna, we could have shut down UH operations completely, crippling the institution forcing TMT construction. Simply put, we have to hit wherever it hurts.

In reality, this is extremely complex. Many ALU organizers and members are settlers—including those writing this essay—and the university is a colonial legacy project. The anti-colonial struggle within UH is a fight we want to advance, but also a source of great internal tension. The ALU Executive Committee believes that dismantling Hawai'i settler colonialism when perpetrated by the university is part of our duties. But we represent graduate workers who participate and profit from the university's settler colonialism. We are striving to unite a diverse graduate student population, without watering down our stand on intersectional struggles. While we cannot, and do not want to remain silent on social justice issues affecting our members, expressing radical politics or claiming ideological purity serves nearly no one if we can no longer turn out a large portion of our members. A union's power lies in its workers standing together.

Because a union always has to come back to the table, though some members disagreed with our then-chair's statement on Maunakea, they will return to join us in fighting for sick leave, higher wages, and collective bargaining. Our work is political education rooted in solidarity, in identifying our intersecting struggles and collective oppressors. To this end, in the fall of 2019, we held "Maunakea Talk Story" events every few weeks, providing forums for difficult conversations about settler colonial violence and science. These were productive, but the vast majority of the work still needs to be done. When we contact members or hold events, some folks still renounce their ALU membership because of our chair's statement. But new members have sometimes been referred by folks who previously renounced their membership. We have hope.

Labor organizations working towards radical intersectional solidarity must avoid focusing on immediate material gains to engage membership, and commit to personal and societal transformation on a deeper level. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the deep structural oppressions most apparent during times of crisis, as well as our deep need for loving communities. We have the chance to huluhia in Hawai'i Pae 'Āina—to build a movement so strong it alters our landscape. No single event is the huluhia. Our sick leave petition was not, and even though it drew nearly 20,000 people together, the Black Lives Matter protest on June 6, 2020 was not either. The huluhia is that we witnessed that a community of labor, Indigenous, and social justice organizers can pull together one of the largest mass protests in

Hawai‘i history in about one week. ALU is not a hulihiā, but we hope to be part of one. As organizers, our task is to dismantle one imperialist institution among many in this archipelago, becoming in the process part of one great and mighty wave. One movement.

Graduate workers are often seen as “in transit”—from elsewhere, going somewhere else soon. But a PhD at UH frequently takes seven to ten years, and over sixty percent of graduate students qualify for in-state tuition. They did not move here simply to attend school. Many are parents or caretakers. We are responsible for much of the teaching and mentorship of undergraduate students, and through these connections and our research work, we profoundly affect this place.

We vow not to be moved by the forces of our intersecting oppressions as we join in solidarity to become a movement itself, emerging from the earth to carve out our own landscapes.

Works Cited

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This essay was written by Lucie Knor and Alex Miller on behalf of the executive committee of Academic Labor United, and does not reflect the opinions of the entire organization.

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