Campus Organizing and Today's Movement Building Moment

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On college campuses nationwide students are organizing with university workers who are fighting for living wages. Graduate teaching assistants are forming unions. Protests are coordinated against sweatshop-made goods. Campus and community activists are organizing against rape and violence toward women. Students are organizing against racism, racial profiling, and the roll back of affirmative action on their campuses. Students are protesting the war and the prison-industrial complex, against homelessness and poverty, against injustice toward immigrants. In the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, students at historically black colleges and universities, as well as at majority campuses, are organizing alternative spring breaks to help in the clean up and rebuilding efforts in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast.

The rise in student activism and campus organizing is linked to the deepening crises and growing social struggles in society as a whole.

In the Beginning

In the 1980s, 1990s, and first decade of the 21st century, corporate globalization and neoliberalism took hold in the United States and across the globe, as the reforms and social safety net of the 1960s and 1970s came under attack. The Zapatista uprising in Mexico on January 1, 1994, in opposition to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the destruction it meant to their livelihood, sparked a powerful global process. Similarly, social movements in the United States began to organize. People marched in Seattle in 1999 to challenge the World Trade Organization. People have gathered every January since 2001 at the World Social Forum, a convergence of the movements and struggles of the world’s peoples to proclaim “another world is possible” and to strategize how to make it a reality (Katz-Fishman & Scott 2006). In 2006 they took to the streets in support of immigrant rights; and since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, they have marched to end the occupation in Iraq.

In this historic context, student activists responded to local and global issues and challenges. In the 1990s, with jobs and wages deteriorating and college costs soaring, the United States Student Association organized for expanded access to higher education. Despite protests, the average tuition and fees at public institutions increased from $2,628 in the 1986-87 academic year to $5,836 in 2006-07 (Mathews 2006). This year, the Democratizing Education Network (DEN) is calling for an April Mobilization for full public funding of higher education and eventually “free” higher education, affirmative action, an end to racism and sexism, and a full higher education democracy charter (DEN 2007).

Labor Pains and Globalization

The degradation of academic labor sparked organizing drives for the right to unionize, for fair working conditions, benefits, and wages, and for affirmative action and equity. Graduate assistants, who do much of the undergraduate teaching, launched unions across the country. It was the Yale University grade strike in 1995-96 that made national news and provoked a retaliatory union-busting response. This strike also embodied the increasingly harsh reality of academic workers, especially graduate assistants and part-timers, and their unity with other low-wage campus workers.

Corporate globalization and the surge in sweatshops throughout the world inspired students to boycott sweatshop-made goods on university campuses. Successful campaigns against Nike in the mid-1990s and the formation of Student Labor Action Coalitions on many campuses led to the founding of United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) in 1998 by student activists from 30 schools. Victorious campus sit-ins at Duke, Georgetown, Universities of Arizona, Michigan, North Carolina-Chapel Hill, and Wisconsin in 1999, energized USAS and the organization of the Workers Rights Consortium as its monitoring mechanism (Clawson 2003; Featherstone 2002).

USAS and the Jobs with Justice Student Labor Action Project joined in larger social movement mobilizations, including global social justice and living wage campaigns for low-wage campus workers in the late 1990s and 2000s. Student organizations also challenged the interpenetration of global corporations and campuses through participation in anti-corporate campaigns against “Killer Coke” and Wal-Mart, among others (Clawson 2003; Featherstone 2002).

Student activists organized against multiple forms of oppression. At Gallaudet University, the university for the deaf, students protested from spring to fall 2006, demanding administration responsiveness to the needs of deaf students and preventing the appointment of a president they felt did not represent their community. Students at Howard and Hampton Universities helped organize the campus out and protest of 5,000 at the Supreme Court in November 2006 to support affirmative action and racial diversity plans for K-12 school districts in Seattle and St. Louis.
Critical Questions and Reflections

There are critical questions organizers must explore and answer as we move forward: What is our relationship to student activists as teachers and activists? How do we bridge the historic divide between campus and community? How are student organizing and our own activism connected to today’s rising social movement for justice, equality, and liberation? What is our vision? What is our long-term political strategy?

We do not have the space and time in this article to fully explore these questions, which Rose Brewer and I began a dialogue on at an ASA workshop, “Preparing Students as Activists,” in August 2006. We can share a few reflections, based on years of activism and movement building in Project South, as scholar activists and movement builders in community spaces (Katz-Fishman & Scott 2006).

In today’s movement-building moment—increasing activity, developing consciousness, and converging of struggles—student and scholar activists are an essential part of the movement, as in past movements. A key challenge is creating a critical classroom and campus space that respects the integrity of that diverse social location while simultaneously being a bridge to more complex community and movement spaces. For student and scholar activists to move as co-equals with community and low-income activists can be a difficult process. It takes time, patience, intentionality, and hard work in order to understand our “relative privilege,” and to build relationships and trust so students have a place at the social movement table.

Organizing, including campus organizing, at its best is part of a larger project of social movements and social transformation. The movement we are building is rooted in the convergence of many fronts of struggle. It is multi-issue, multi-sector, and crosses divides of race, class, gender, nationality, and age. It is multi-racial, multi-gendered, multi-generational, and is locally grounded, nationally connected, and globally networked. Campus organizing needs to see the big picture of systems of multiple oppressions and exploitation, to have a clear vision of the future we are struggling to create, and to develop a political strategy for system transformation, human liberation, and protection of the earth.

With space at future ASA meetings, we will delve deeper into these questions, which are essential to a movement-building strategy. We invite all student and scholar activists to join us at the U.S. Social Forum in Atlanta, June 27-July 1, 2007, in this historic moment (www.ussf2007.org).

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References


resistance, with tools that will win Student organizing isn’t the most burning issue in American politics today. But socialists would be wrong to dismiss it. On-campus organizing can be the beginning of lives dedicated to renewing labor militancy and rebuilding the Left. From that moment onward, the movement’s leaders took a sharp turn toward campus militancy, organizing national campaigns to mobilize and radicalize their classmates. In doing so, the NSL thought that students who became active in protesting retrenchment and inequality in education would learn through this struggle that the source of their hardships and the high cost of education was capitalism itself.