

Black Power, Student Power

An Interview with Black Radical Activist Bill Sales

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During the 1960s Bill Sales was a radical student activist. His experiences show how the Black student movement was shaped by the overall Black liberation movement, and how Black students in turn helped shape the white student movement.

*It is interesting to compare Bill's version of the early stages of SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) and the Columbia Strike (an important occupation of buildings at New York City's Columbia University by Black and white students in 1968) with more mainstream and white-centered accounts of the same period. His stories also bring to life the incredible radical diversity and power of the Black Liberation movement. Readers interested in learning more should read Bill's latest book, *From Civil Rights to Black Liberation: Malcolm X and the Organization of Afro-American Unity* (South End Press, Boston, 1994).*

U of Penn and the NAACP

Meg Star: How did you become an activist as a student?

Bill Sales: "I was involved with the student chapter of the NAACP at the University of Pennsylvania in 1962. I had first come in contact with the movement on that campus through some people who were members of RAM. [The Revolutionary Action movement was a semi-clandestine organization that, beginning in 1963, attempted to combine mass direct action with the tactics of self-defense to push the movement towards revolutionary politics.] Two members in particular were friends of mine: Max Stanford [Muhammed Ahmed] and Stanley Davis. I knew Max from high school, and Stanley was a student at Penn before we became active. We all ran track together, believe it or not."

In 1962 the Penn Chapter of the NAACP invited Malcolm X to speak on campus, and they picketed Democratic Party Headquarters in Philadelphia to support Robert Williams. Williams had been the president of the NAACP in Monroe County, NC until 1959, when he called for armed defense in the face of growing KKK violence. During the next several years James Farmer, the Rev. Leon Sullivan, and many other Civil Rights leaders also spoke on campus.

BS: "Then I went to the march on Washington and was very impressed by all the goings on. I wanted to come back and assume the leadership of the NAACP on campus; I wasn't satisfied with its level of activism."

In the meantime, during the summer of '63, CORE [The Congress of Racial Equality was a direct-action-oriented civil-rights group that emphasized community based actions in Northern cities.] and the NAACP were confronting de facto segregation of construction sites in Philadelphia. Bill's two radical friends were arrested after being beaten by the police at one site. U of Penn was undergoing major renovation, so the students confronted the university's own hiring practices.

"Now all during the four years at Penn I was being exposed to different ideological currents, both in the Civil Rights Movement and in what came to be the New Left. I didn't have the slightest idea that that was what it was at the time. In my senior year, protesting segregation, I came in close contact with CORE and the NAACP. I can put it this way: I developed a greater appreciation for CORE and an utter disdain for the NAACP."

Black Students Organize

When Bill graduated from Penn he went to Columbia University to do graduate work. He arrived in the fall of 1964, the fall after African-American students organized on campus.

“A year after I left Penn Bob Brand, a white student from the NAACP, got in touch with me. He asked my permission to convert that chapter into an SDS chapter because at that point the only people left were white students who were very much interested in the anti-war situation. Many of those guys who became important in SDS got their first exposure in civil rights activity.”

Bill arrived at Columbia in 1964, the same semester that the Students Afro-American Society was founded. In the mid-'60s campuses that for centuries had been lily-white were opening the doors to Black students for the first time. Columbia, Harvard and Yale were a little ahead of the majority of campuses.

“A whole lot of debate was going on about identity, about who we were as Black students, and what was our responsibility to the movement.”

The numbers of Black students were increasing every semester and the class base of the students accepted by the college was becoming more working class, which affected the level of militance.

“There was a basis for effective group action. People sensed that potential, and also, no Black person at this time could get away without defining their lives at least in part in terms of the struggle that was going on in the larger society.”

While Bill studied Swahili and met African leaders in the internationalist community around Columbia, he also reunited with Max Stanford.

“Max had been working with Malcolm in the OAAU period [the Organization of Afro-American Unity] and I ran into him shortly after Malcolm was assassinated. Max helped me get oriented to the scene in NY.”

“Gym” Crow & Early Alliances

In '68 the off-campus and on-campus movements were to come together. Columbia University had admitted Black students while continuing to be a smug and racist institution, completely out of touch with the neighboring Harlem community. The university occupies a small area of land, one side of which is a cliff overlooking the public Morningside Park, which is used primarily by the Harlem community. Columbia worked out an arrangement through its shady Board of Trustees' ruling-class connections to lease public land for the site of a new gym. Originally the gym was intended to be in Morningside Park, and to be completely closed to community residents. When the community objected to that Columbia started construction of two gyms: a large one for Columbia students and a smaller one for the community residents. Protesting the “Jim Crow Gym” brought together many different insurgent communities.

Already alliances between SDS and the African American students organization had developed through two experiences. By 1967 the university had allowed the student athletes to be developed into a right-wing firing squad that attacked SDS demonstrations.

“So one day Black students went out there. We had our own beef with these cats because they were racists. So we joined in to help the SDS guys because those people just didn't know how to

fight. Not that they weren't game, they just didn't know what to do in that kind of situation. So we went out and knocked heads with these jocks."

CORE was trying to organize a union among the mostly African-American and Latino workers on campus. Black students and some of SDS became involved.

"Ted Gold, one of the activists that got blown up in the townhouse [a member of Weatherman who was killed during an explosion at a safe house in NY on March 6, 1970], was very active in that. We all knew Gold long before we knew Rudd and those cats. The hell with them! They were off on some trip, but we knew the folks that were down. They were down long before it was fashionable to be down.

"One of the things that really got to me about Rudd was how you write a book confessing all the things you did were wrong. That's bullshit! It wasn't wrong just because you lost and it didn't work. There's a difference between winning and losing and being wrong."

Alliances off-campus were also very important to the Black students. In '67 there was a Black Power Conference in Maryland that had a special meeting for student activists.

"There were no more than 10 or 15 people in the place, but the following spring we were all involved in building takeovers on our different campuses. Herman Ferguson [an important Black activist and political prisoner, Ferguson was involved both in the Republic of New Afrika and the OAAU] was there that day; he was already on the lam."

Bill became involved in an underground student group called "cadre." The members were at different campuses. They took karate, studied, and made contact with various groups in Harlem.

MS: Why were you clandestine?

BS: "This was an era when people got shot. H. Rap Brown was already underground. Some of the people we worked with were underground. It wasn't as if we were planning to blow things up. But we felt that what we were doing was objectively revolutionary. And you just didn't run around in a public organization. We assigned ourselves public organizations on campus to be in."

The Columbia Strike

In April and May of 1968 Columbia University exploded into the famous strike and blockade. During those months over 1,000 students occupied four buildings on campus, fought the police, and held a dean hostage (briefly).

The role of the Black students in these events has been somewhat eclipsed in popular accounts. After describing the alliances on campus and off-campus that had been developed over the previous years, Bill described the day the decision was made to occupy the first building.

"1968 in some ways appeared to be spontaneous. On the day the takeover occurred none of us had planned a takeover."

Bill and his friends went down to an SDS demonstration at the sundial [a central location on the main part of the Columbia campus] to fight the jocks and to support the new president of the Afro-American Students Organization who was speaking.

"When I got there I swear there were 5,000 people. It was a total shocker. I expected 200 people or so—the usual demonstration. The jocks were completely neutralized. The demonstration started by trying to take some demands into the president of Columbia University, but he closed his office building. The Black students wanted to storm the building, but Rudd said no. Someone in Progressive Labor said: 'Let's charge the gym site.' So we all ran down."

Community activists and campus activists had recently been arrested demonstrating at the site.

“We ran down 1,000 strong and all hell broke loose. It’s the first and only time I ever got into actual combat with the police. We should have all been dead but there was a sergeant who pulled his forces back. At that time I was trying to break this cop’s thumb because I said “If he gets his gun out I’m a dead person.”

I had only jumped him because one of his associates had started hitting one of our guys and then one of CADRE punched him out. This guy was facing me so I grabbed his wrist and twisted him around. I didn’t want to fight this cat and he didn’t want to fight me. I said I can take this guy; he’s scared of me. He’ll shoot me out of fear if he gets his gun out. People don’t realize how things escalate. Lethal confrontations that nobody means to happen—people were all fighting and this sergeant comes down and tells his men to back off and leave us alone. He recognized that it was Harlem and if they grabbed a bunch of Black students all hell would break loose.”

Bill stressed how many different people had their own organizations then and were prepared for confrontation. The Black women on campus, repulsed by the sexism of the African-American students group, had their own organization with their own community contacts.

“They didn’t want to get everything through the guys. That meant that independently they had come to the same decisions we had come to, and they had a structure for functioning. When the shit hit the fan they weren’t tailing behind the men.”

After the confrontation at the gym site SDS and the Black students occupied the first building. While SDS leaders remained ambiguous about the decisions to occupy buildings for several days, the Black Students were firm from the beginning and influenced the actions of the rest of the campus.

The Movement Today?

When asked about the Black movement today Bill said:

“There is no Black movement today. There are a number of different people who are struggling as organizations or individuals, but a movement would imply a consensus on some very basic demands; a clear understanding of who the enemy is and some notion of what the future would look like. We don’t have that yet. I hope we’re building to it..

MS: Is there anything you’d like to say about white solidarity?

BS: “I think there are some obvious errors that white leftists have made that they don’t need to make again! The arrogance and paternalism in relationship to the Black movement—to assume that you know what’s right for everyone because you have a revolutionary analysis of society, etc., etc. To see a certain kind of division of labor—you provide the intellectual muscle and the troops come from various Third World communities—that’s disastrous.

A second thing that we really want is to build up a left inside of white working-class communities. We need to develop another pole in the communities that have been conceded to the fascists. That has been very difficult to do and very dangerous. That’s why it’s not done much! It’s actually easier for a white person to work in communities of color. Once they know you’re for real, people aren’t hostile to you, whereas in the white communities you can get murdered!

A third point is not to get manipulated by feelings of guilt. There are a whole lot of opportunists in the Black and Latino communities who'll try to manipulate you because you are white. You have to stand up for what you believe in.

And then of course it's important to study hard, be humble, and really listen. I know that as a 52-year-old one of the really frustrating things is trying to pass on your knowledge to the generation coming behind, because they think they know more than you already. But without an open mind you can screw up and repeat past 'mistakes.'"

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