

Students Fight Educational Apartheid

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On January 14, New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani attacked the City University of New York's open admissions policy in his State of the City address, claiming that the University has no "standards." Within weeks, several CUNY Trustees and college presidents made proposals to limit remedial education and impose stricter entrance requirements on students at CUNY's 17 colleges. These proposals sparked a series of student and faculty protests, but barely three months passed before the Trustees voted on May 26 to end all remedial classes at the senior colleges.

CUNY's open admissions policy was won by radical Black and Latino students in 1969, with a long struggle culminating in a student strike at City College that had tremendous support from the surrounding Harlem community. At the time, the student body of City College was 94% white; it was called the "pearl of Harlem." To open the door to higher education to all New Yorkers, the open admissions policy guaranteed a place at CUNY for everyone who has graduated from high school or earned a G.E.D. Now the majority of CUNY students are people of color and many are single mothers, immigrants, and poor people.

Advocates of open admissions at CUNY also pressured the NYC Board of Education to improve the city's neglected public school system so that all high school graduates would be prepared for college. Instead, the quality of public education has consistently declined due to overcrowding and budget cuts. As a result, 63% of freshmen entering CUNY fail one or more of three placement tests in math, writing, and reading. These students take remedial classes to bring them up to the college level. This way the more challenging and interesting classes can be taken alongside remediation, which can motivate and inspire a student to patiently work through the drudgery of making up for what is often 12 years of wasted classroom time.

The call to "raise standards" has nothing to do with actually improving education at CUNY. If they wanted to do that, they would restore the departments and faculty that have been eliminated over the years of deep budget cuts. But the call for "standards" resonates with some students who would actually benefit from a shift by CUNY towards elitism.

If CUNY's 4-year colleges stopped offering remedial classes, two thirds of the Black, Latino and Asian students who apply for admission would be turned away, re-establishing educational apartheid at CUNY. Since CUNY has been the primary route out of poverty and into the middle-class for New York City's Black, Latino, and immigrant populations, shutting out thousands of people of these communities will effectively preserve any jobs with decent pay, benefits, and working conditions for white, middle-class graduates.

The Student Movement Comes Back to Life

Student activists started meeting in February to rebuild the movement at CUNY. So far it has been a slow but steady process of growth, based on a conscious effort to learn from the mistakes of past years. At Brooklyn College, for example, this has meant that activists are beginning to understand the need to spend time getting to know the people in clubs on campus and planning events with these clubs instead of expecting individuals to come join some isolated and culturally alienating activist group. At all the colleges, activists need to be more open and welcoming to new people, instead of creating a dynamic of "honcho-ism," where a few individuals enjoy a sense of importance by dominating all the leadership positions. This dynamic is usually related to an abuse of male or white privilege.

Every spring, a new coalition is born in reaction to the latest attack on CUNY. A few years ago, when it was called SLAM! (Student Liberation Action Movement), members proposed a structure to make the coalition more democratic and efficient. Each campus would elect four delegates who could vote in the city-wide meetings. Each delegation had to have at least two women, and at least two people of color. The delegate structure was meant to cut down on honcho-ism and make the city-wide group accountable to the people actually doing work on the campuses. It was hoped that this would also limit the influence of the various opportunist sectarian organizations.

The SLAM! structure passed, but it never actually functioned, because most campuses couldn't get four people to a meeting, and decisions always ended up being made by one-person-one-vote like before. And on top of that, the sectarian left groups kept starting arguments opposing the idea of the structure which had been passed but not put into effect, calling it undemocratic. In a similar self-serving fashion, these same groups would argue that SLAM! was no longer a coalition but an organization of its own, because it had highly developed radical politics that went beyond the immediate crisis and built for struggles against workfare, police brutality, and in support of political prisoners. SLAM's politics already offered a vision of an alternative to the present oppressive system, so an organization (like the ISO or other Trotskyite groups) that hadn't proved itself through good, principled organizing work couldn't easily recruit people who were interested in revolutionary politics and saw no other option.

This year, activists who identify with SLAM! have decided to build a broader coalition with SLAM! as a group within that coalition. SLAM! is now a radical multi-racial caucus of predominantly women that is looking to recruit newer activists and further develop its revolutionary politics. The coalition has passed a proposal by SLAM! activists for a coordinating committee which now functions under a delegate structure similar to the original SLAM! structure. It is made up of two delegates from each college, which means that the meetings are relatively small, so that new activists from under-represented campuses find it easier to participate, and decisions are made more efficiently.

Giving Hell to the Trustees

The CUNY Coalition for Open Admissions has held five demonstrations this semester, in addition to educational events on various campuses. The first protest, on February 23, brought approximately a hundred people to CUNY Central Headquarters, where the Board of Trustees was meeting. Although it was cold and the rain poured down, students kept up an energetic spirit and made rousing speeches. About twenty students got inside, and several denounced the Board members for dismantling open admissions. Two activists were arrested for leaping onto the Board table and shouting "No educational apartheid!" They were both tackled and dragged out. The meeting was then illegally closed to the public by Board Chair Anne Paolucci.

On March 19, students picketed Board Vice Chair Herman Badillo's law office. Badillo is the mayor's mouthpiece on "standards" at CUNY, and he has been criticizing open admissions for years. About 100 students demonstrated and then marched to Hunter College, after enjoying some fiery speeches, call-and-response chants, and shouts of "Shut 'em down!" whenever the next Board of Trustees meeting was mentioned. Needless to say, the police were not thrilled with the level of passionate anger and unity that they were seeing. On the way to Hunter, they attacked the marching students, claiming that the sound permit had been violated. Cops shoved

protesters into the glass doors of a ritzy Upper East Side boutique and arrested five students. The rest of us reached Hunter College only to discover that a horde of police were waiting for the students to come outside, and that undercover officers had found their way onto campus to look for students who had been targeted for arrest during the march. Students managed to round up the undercover cops and kick them off campus.

Almost two hundred students gathered outside the Board of Trustees meeting on March 23. Many newly active students came to the rally and shared the spirit of united fury by making lots of noise for open admissions. Protesters celebrated our first victory when it was announced that a milder version of the proposal to end all remedial classes at the senior colleges had been defeated by the Board.

One month later, on April 27, over 800 students, faculty and community members protested outside the Trustees' meeting. Student leaders who had been recently trained in demonstration security by two former members of the Young Lords (a 1960's Puerto Rican revolutionary organization) maintained a high level of organization and kept the police from attacking the lively crowd. Inside, the Trustees voted to postpone the decision.

On Tuesday May 26, students, faculty, and community members crowded into the Board room and heckled Trustee Badillo as he announced his proposal, shouting, "Harvard has remediation!" "Yale has remediation!" The Trustees were still split on the issue, but Badillo knew that he now had enough votes to pass the proposal. As Chairwoman Paolucci closed the meeting to the public, police arrested 20 demonstrators outside for blocking traffic: students crying with frustration and loss, professors in academic dress robes, and one state assemblymember.

By the time protesters returned from the precinct, the Board had voted to wipe out remediation at all of CUNY's four-year colleges. Students tried to get into the Board room; four more were arrested. Defenders of CUNY are now planning the next stage of the struggle to block the dismantling of open admissions.

To Build a Lasting Movement

One of the most valuable lessons that CUNY student activists have learned over the past three years is that we need to build a real base of support on each campus — a base of students from diverse backgrounds who enjoy working together and are committed to the struggle at CUNY in the long-term. Campus groups will only lose by trying to cut corners and focusing all their energy on getting people out to one off-campus rally each year. It is vital to ask ourselves how we are using each rally to build the group on campus itself, instead of thinking our end goal is simply to get a high turnout for the rally.

As tuition rises and financial aid is cut, students have to work longer hours to stay in school. We need to build a movement that is worth people's time — a movement that is rich in culture, both in the many musical, artistic, and historical traditions and languages that people bring with them to the movement, but also in the culture of resistance that we build. If we can create a student movement at CUNY that fulfills these human needs for people and inspires us to stick together and grow in the years to come, we will be much harder to defeat.

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