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THE MYTH OF STUDENT APATHY

LIKE, MAN, IT AIN'T THE SIXTIES--BUT THERE'S PLENTY OF ACTIVISM ON CAMPUS.

By PETER DREIER. *The Nation*. Apr 13, 1998.

The front-page headline in the January Los Angeles Times didn't mince words: "Freshmen Get High Marks-in Apathy." The story summarized a U.C.L.A.-sponsored national survey of first-year college students that found growing careerism and declining interest in politics. But a few weeks earlier, the paper had failed to report on a successful protest campaign at Occidental College, located about three miles from the Times building, in which students persuaded the college president, John Slaughter, who sits on the Atlantic Richfield (Arco) board, to issue a public statement criticizing the oil giant's support for the military dictatorship in Burma.

"That's typical," said Sonya Huber of the Center for Campus Organizing, a Boston, Massachusetts-based training program and clearinghouse. "There's a great deal of campus activism, but it hardly ever gets covered in the mainstream media." Huber claims there are as many students involved in social activism today as at any time since the late sixties, "but it's spread around a lot of different issues. There's no single focal point, like the Vietnam War or civil rights, so it's harder to see."

Huber's analysis certainly reflects the reality at Occidental College, a 1,600-student liberal arts institution. Occidental is a selective college and an unusually diverse one; *US News & World Report* ranked it number one in commitment to diversity in 1997. Nevertheless, its students and faculty are economically and politically comparable to counterparts at other four-year colleges. The campus has a crazy-quilt of student activism, including environmentalists who promote recycling and research siting of hazardous waste facilities in Los Angeles County; MECHA/ALAS, a Latino group that is fighting California's anti-affirmative action policy and educating the campus about events in Chiapas, Mexico; a Women's Center and a gay/lesbian group that bring speakers to campus and sponsor discussion groups; organizations like Amnesty International working on human rights and solidarity efforts; and the Student Labor Action Coalition (SLAC), which recruits students to support union organizing campaigns.

In addition, close to half the student body is involved in community service projects, including tutoring at local elementary schools, working with homeless shelters and abused women, and volunteering for the AIDS Service Center-much of it coordinated by the student-run Center for Volunteerism and Community Service. These "direct service" activities often have a politicizing impact on students, explains Melissa Mazin, C.V.C.S.'s director. "Students like doing something that is tangible and immediate," she says, "but some students get frustrated when they see that it may not be changing anything. Then they try to find ways to make systemic change, not charity."

Many of the students involved in protest over Arco's Burma connection had never been politically active before. The effort was instigated by the Free Burma Coalition, a national organization pushing U.S. corporations to divest from Burma. "Lots of students here had never heard of Burma, much less its government's human rights abuses," explained Sara Hunt, a freshman from Plano, Texas, who was a key organizer of the protest. Hunt recruited several other students to help inform the campus about Burma's human rights violations and Arco's joint venture with the Burmese government to drill for natural gas. They distributed fliers and leaflets with shocking photographs of Burmese political prisoners, sent e-mail messages to all students and faculty, and showed a video produced by the F.B.C.

Following an intensive week of publicity, a November 21 protest outside Slaughter's office, including a speech by Burmese expatriate U Kyaw Win, attracted fifty students waving banners that read "Arco \$ = Slavery in Burma" and "Help Us Free Burma." Slaughter, an African-American engineer with strong liberal credentials who headed the National Science Foundation during the Carter Administration, promised to investigate their concerns. Several days later, he released a statement indicating that "I have conveyed to Arco leadership my own personal feeling that I would prefer that the company not conduct operations in Burma and that it should withdraw from the country."

Hunt noted that the protest "wasn't about Slaughter and it wasn't just about Arco. It was to educate students on how global

corporations are taking over." Students today-including a growing number of immigrants from Asia and Latin America-are much more aware of and affected by political and economic globalization than previous generations. To help make the global connection, Hunt helped start the Student Labor Action Coalition and hopes to participate in the A.E.L.-C.I.O.'s Union Summer program when the academic year is over.

Indeed, the revitalization of the nation's labor movement is reverberating on campuses across the country. Union Summer, now in its third year, has engaged thousands of students in organizing campaigns. Many participants return to their campuses and help set up student groups to support union organizing. Fernando Cazares, an Occidental sophomore, worked with the Service Employees International Union's Justice for Janitors campaign last year and a month later with Union Summer, and returned to campus eager to enlist other students in labor-support work.

While in high school, Cazares, a native of Mexico who moved with his family to California in 1990, worked in a Los Angeles-area sweatshop with his stepfather and brother. His stepfather participated in an unsuccessful unionization drive. "I saw how the union campaign helped my stepfather take charge of his life, and how frustrated and desperate he felt when the union lost," he said.

But Cazares had put that experience behind him until he saw a Union Summer recruitment film in one of his classes and "those memories came back," filling him with anger and energy. He immediately applied to join the Union Summer project. Cazares identified several other Union Summer alums on campus, recruited friends and classmates, and began holding regular meetings to discuss how SLAC could educate students about the labor movement and get directly involved in local organizing efforts.

SLAC now has about twenty-five members. The group has already brought Occidental students to picket lines in support of the hotel workers campaign at the downtown New Otani [see Mike Davis, "Kajima's Throne of Blood," February 12, 1996]. Last month, in response to Guess?'s misleading "100% sweatshopfree" ad in their newspaper, students brought Guess? workers to campus and circulated a petition pledging students to boycott the company's products. SLAC is also hoping to launch a "sweatshopfree campus" drive around clothes sold in the college bookstore, a campaign that students at U.C.L.A. and Duke have already won. If the college's office workers carry out a fledgling effort to unionize, SLAC will mobilize student support. Occidental SLAC leaders are talking with other campuses in the area about setting up a regional network and sponsoring a conference.

Most campus activism, however, is fragmented and issuespecific. Several organizations-the United States Student Association, the Ralph Nader-affiliated Public Interest Research Groups (PIRGs), the Student Environmental Action Coalition and the Democratic Socialists of America Youth Section-try to link campus groups around different issues. But "there's no S.D.S. or SNCC to connect student activists," explained Bill Capowski, executive director of the Center for Campus Organizing, referring to the two major student-led progressive groups from the sixties.

C.C.O. was founded in 1995 to help fill that gap, not by becoming a national organization but by providing nuts-and-bolts workshops, training manuals, research on issues, support for progressive student journalists and a Web site (www.cco.org) for campus activists. "Students are involved in a broader array of issues than ever before," Capowski said, citing international solidarity, access to higher education, attacks on affirmative action, environmental concerns, labor and growing corporate influence on campus as the major concerns, "but there's not yet a sense of a national student 'movement.'"

Students at Occidental and elsewhere are flocking to courses about the sixties. But these courses often impart misleading or contradictory views of that era. One view, often fostered by the news media, is that the persistence of poverty, racism and environmental problems proves that nothing really changes; idealism and activism don't pay off. Another, often unwittingly reinforced by baby boomer professors, is that by an accident of birth today's students missed the most exciting, never-to-be-repeated years of the century. Both these stereotypes-cynicism and nostalgia-can be used to justify apathy and indifference. That isn't what today's budding activists need to hear.

One problem with the U.C.L.A. report is that lack of activism is not the same as apathy. "A lot of today's students want to believe that they can make a contribution to a better world," says sociologist Dick Flacks of the University of California, Santa Barbara, who is researching college students' political views. "Our responsibility as professors is to help them understand that activism and dissent are a continuous thread in our history and culture, that they have paid off in making our society more democratic, that they can make a difference."

Two decades ago, right-wing foundations and professors took the initiative to encourage conservative activism on campus. They funded dozens of right-wing student publications, subsidized student organizations and conferences and recruited conservative students for internships and jobs in right-wing think tanks and publications as well as positions in the Reagan and Bush administrations and Congress. Their efforts had an impact far out of proportion to the numbers of sympathizers on campus.

"Right-wing forces recognized the importance of grooming the next generation," says Flacks, who has been studying student

culture for three decades. "Progressive foundations and organizations haven't learned that lesson." C.C.O., for example, operates on a shoestring budget of \$160,000. In contrast, the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, the leading right-wing campus umbrella group, has an annual budget of about \$5 million.

The changing demographics of higher education are also transforming the political culture on campuses. Many, especially minority students, are the first in their families to attend college. Many also feel insecure about their economic future. At Occidental, where blacks, Latinos and Asians constitute more than 40 percent of the student body, at least three-quarters of students have some kind of financial aid. A majority work part time, but, in contrast to the sixties, students from working-class and from minority backgrounds at the more selective colleges are more inclined toward activism than are more affluent students.

Today's freshmen were nurtured during the Reagan and Bush years, and started high school when the Gingrichites took over Congress. So it shouldn't be surprising that the U.C.L.A. survey found that, in general, students entering college last fall were less interested in politics than their counterparts in the past. Of course, a study taken during the first week of freshman year can't predict the effect of college on political and intellectual pursuits.

U.C.S.B.'s Flacks warns that such surveys don't adequately reflect today's mood. "If they did a study like this in 1960, it would have shown the same level of conservatism, apathy and antiintellectualism on college campuses," he said. "But a few years later, campuses were centers of all kinds of political engagement. These surveys can't account for the pockets of student activism that can have an extraordinary influence but take time to build up." The widespread involvement of students in community service projects, Flacks said, is reminiscent of early sixties students' enthusiasm for the Peace Corps and inner-city tutoring programs.

"Student activism ebbs and flows, but it never disappears," says Flacks. "Small numbers of activists on a campus can make a big difference in changing the climate, especially when some major crisis or issue emerges, and students look to these activists for leadership and direction."

That's how Occidental College activists like Sara Hunt and Fernando Cazares see it, too. "It's sad that people see my generation as apathetic," says Hunt. "I don't think that's true. I think we're at the beginning of a new student movement." Cazares observes, "Under the surface there's a lot of idealism. We just have to find concrete ways to help students express it. That's what activists do. That's why I'm an activist."

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