

## **“Springtime for America (Again)”**

When Ronald Reagan ran for re-election for president in 1984, he declared that it was “springtime for America”. He should have said it was “springtime for Corporate America.” Under his administration and those that followed, Corporate America and the world wide capitalist class increased its domination of the world, seemingly without an equivalent resistance from the working class, especially from the US working class. While this has started to change in recent years, the movement in the US has been lagging far behind.

Now that is starting to change.

### **Youth Movement**

In California, a college and university student movement started over the last six months. The attacks on college and university students that have generated this movement are part of wider attacks on public education as well as on all public services and on the working class in general. Almost immediately, the university students grasped the slogan “defend free public education” – making the link between their own situation and that of public education in general. At a California state-wide student conference last October, it was agreed to organize a state-wide strike for March 4.

Here in the working class town of Oakland, California, an “Outreach Committee” was set up build the movement in this area. One key issue was decided immediately: Our intent was to actually disrupt the workings of the state, and we were going to try to do that through setting up a protest starting at noon, rather than at the end of the work day. We also wanted this to be an event of, by and for the youth of Oakland.

This contrasted to San Francisco, where the union officialdom conspired with the Board of Education to block a day-time rally. There, they organized a rally for 5:00 p.m. to ensure that workers didn’t walk off work and students didn’t walk out of school. Throughout the region, those forces who sought to tame the movement pushed for attendance at this San Francisco rally rather than the one in Oakland.

A key focus in Oakland was to organize in the high schools. However, the size of our effort was limited by the extreme constraints on our actual forces and resources. As a result, in most schools we were unable to establish regular working groups to organize a strike. Yet on March 4, by 7:30 in the morning, there were some 30 or 40 students standing outside the high school near my home, with home-made picket signs in hand, shouting and cheering. *With just the minimal outside help, these students had organized themselves!*

### **Euphoria**

The noon rally at the city center was one of the most dynamic this particular participant has ever seen in his 40 years of activism, as wave after wave of students came rolling into the rally. Hundreds of students from Oakland High School, came marching in, shouting, cheering and dancing. Then came students from East Oakland, from other parts of

Oakland, and finally from Berkeley, including University of California, Berkeley. Each contingent was greeted with euphoria, and they responded in kind.

It was consciously decided in advance that we wanted the real voice of the youth to be heard, not some pre-packaged speeches of “important”, mainly older, people. An important part of this plan was to have the music of the youth – rap or “spoken word” – be part of the program. Each contingent of students decided for themselves who would represent them. No mere quotes on an article can adequately portray the electricity of the event, no more than a photograph can portray the splendor of the Grand Canyon. With that in mind, here are some quotes from the event. (Note that almost every other comment was greeted by hands and fists waving in the air and youth cheering and shouting.):

### ***“They Can’t Keep Us Down”***

From two high school students: *“We want all the students’ voices to be heard, no matter what... Si se puede! (‘Yes we can’ in Spanish).” ... “You cut funding, you cut our dreams away.” “Power to the people” “We know that the schools in the hills (where the wealthy tend to live) aren’t being cut; we know that the schools in the (working class) flats (flatlands) are being cut.”*

From a young teacher: *“My parents are immigrants. They came to the country for hope. I don’t see hope.... I’m glad to see that you all know that... you are the future, and I want every one of you to feel that you have a future and a life that is yours, not someone else’s.... I see a community here that is helping itself, and we got to let them know that they can’t keep us down, can they? (Chorus of “noooo!”).”*

From short interviews with two community college students: *“Everything is broken... We need money. We need teachers... this is the start of something (not just a one day affair).” ... “This is the beginning of something.... This is for the older generation, the younger generation, for everybody.”*

From a former substitute teacher, presently a construction worker and socialist: *“You should be very proud of the historical traditions of your city. The very last general strike in the US took place in this city (Oakland), Dec. 1, 1946. Twenty years later, straight out of West Oakland, Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale and 16 year old Bobby Hutton started the black Panthers.... We’ve taken the struggle forward. We are not stopping. This must be one of the opening shots. Are you with me? (Cheers and shouts of “Yeaaaahhh!”) Should education be free? (Yeaaaahhhhh!”)”*

### **Music and “Controlled Chaos”**

It is said that every movement of working class people generates its own music. This was clearly seen here, as the music of the youth – rap, or “spoken word” – was a central part of the program. The unrelenting, driving energy of the rap artists permeated the entire event.

In the history of military strategy and tactics, it is often noted that any plan for any particular battle almost always breaks down within the first few minutes as it is impossible to account for all the factors involved. To an extent, this was what happened at the Oakland protest; from the start, the enormous enthusiasm led to a state of near chaos on the stage as dozens of students nearly overwhelmed the stage, and the organizers were unprepared for this. It was a state of near ‘controlled chaos’, but this very state was overall positive. The youth, themselves, clearly saw and felt that this was *their* event, that it was *their* feelings and thoughts that were being expressed in the way that *they, themselves* express things.

The Oakland protest stands as sharp contrast to that organized for 5:00 p.m. by the Oakland school teachers’ union officialdom nearby and the one at the same time organized in San Francisco by a combined effort of the San Francisco capitalist politicians and the San Francisco union hierarchy. Both were tame and dull in contrast.

### **Movement Will Continue**

Unlike developments of previous decades, this youth movement is almost certain to carry on, since the issue that generates it – the economic crisis and the resulting economic attacks – will not disappear. As it does, it will tend to sink ever deeper roots into the working class as a whole. This is so because, unlike the period of the youth movements of the 1960s and ‘70s, in this period the working class as a whole has been facing major and ongoing attacks. Combined with this has been the process of an ever-increasing isolation between the rank and file of the unions and their own leadership. As a result, the union hierarchy is in a far weaker position to control and co-opt this growing movement..

### **Attempts to Co-opt**

This doesn’t mean they won’t try. They are already combining with the liberal wing of the (capitalist controlled) Democratic Party to divert the movement. The main drive in that attempt is to tame it, to make it less confrontational and less disruptive. Coinciding with this is an attempt to channel its goals into those more acceptable to the union officialdom and the liberal Democrats. They have two main goals: First is channel this growing movement away from direct confrontation with and mass disobedience of the forces of the state; they will attempt this through attempts to drag the movement into liberal Democratic politics. In addition, they will try to divert the movement into more tame goals.

It is inevitable that in the earlier stages of this youth movement, the focus will be on public education. However, it was clear from talking with different young people that they clearly see the link between this and the attacks on all workers. It will be important to consciously foster this as the movement develops.

No movement of any sector of the working class, however, develops in a straight line towards confronting the system as a whole. However, the conditions for this are more present now than at any time in this writer’s experience. This is because of the economic crisis that capitalism as a whole is experiencing and the resulting unrelenting attacks on the working class.

### **Global Spring Time**

Thus, a new “spring time” is dawning in America - a spring time for the US working class. As opposed to how spring weather develops globally – where spring in the Northern Hemisphere means fall in the global South – this springtime is a global spring for the world’s working class.