

Cooley Ain't Cool

Amy Greenwell

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(Women's News Co-op) — A state of emergency exists at Cooley High School. Most people who relate to Cooley in any way agree that the situation is very uptight. But it's not affecting everyone the same way and theories about its causes and solutions vary, depending on who you're talking to.

Black students have been harassed, beaten up and "excluded" in large numbers for the past two years. In the spring of 1968 and winter of 1969 members of the white racist group Breakthrough beat up black kids at the school but no police action was ever taken. In the fall of 1969 after a clash between black and white kids, some black kids were expelled but white kids were not.

On March 11th of this year an incident happened where a white gym teacher, Abe Eliowitz, stopped a black student, Walter Morgan, in the hall and asked him for his I.D. Morgan turned quickly and either deliberately or accidentally knocked down a 64-year-old teacher, who suffered a broken wrist. Eliowitz proceeded to beat up Morgan. The student was suspended and Eliowitz took a sick leave.

When Eliowitz returned to school a few weeks later, against the wishes of the Cooley School Community Council, a parents group, the Black Student United Front, began a picket outside the school. The demands were that Eliowitz be removed from Cooley, that all police, public and private, also be removed, that there be amnesty for black students suspended or expelled for political beliefs (approximately 60 black students have been expelled since the beginning of the black struggle at Cooley) and that the BSUF be recognized as a student organization within the school.

Picketing continued through the Week of April 13th. On Thursday, April 16th Greg Hicks, one of the BSUF leaders, was busted in front of school on a charge that he had been involved in a robbery the day before. It was very strange since Greg had been plainly evident all that previous day in the picket line in front of school and at student meetings all evening. Tension was so high that fights between black and white kids broke out and school had to be shut down at 12:30.

On Monday, April 20th, the BSUF decided to have a sit-in at the principal's office to demand that they be heard. As a result of the sit-in 22 black students were "excluded" on the grounds that 1) they were missing class (even though absenteeism runs in the hundreds every day), 2) they were "loitering" (the students were there for an expressed political purpose) and 3) they were interfering with the functioning of the office (they were sitting against the wall and were not in the way of the flow of traffic).

Some of those students came to the Cooley School Community Council meeting that night. After a statement of students' rights which had been researched by Cooley and Mumford students along with an ACLU lawyer, one black student asked the Council to help him in getting back into school on the grounds that he had been illegally excluded. The council, which has no official powers, did not take action.

The rest of the week was super-tense and there were several isolated incidents involving black and white students.

White students are either scared or hostile or both. Some of them have gotten hurt—victims of the hatred that white racism creates. Most of them would like the tension to end; many will probably not be returning to Cooley

in the fall. During the time when false fire alarms were a daily occurrence, whites would congregate on the street corners at the south side of the school for a confrontation with black students but a major clash never developed.

There have been attempts by the Student Council, which is approximately half white and half black, to formulate solutions; but since their meetings are cancelled at the whim of the administration, they feel totally frustrated.

The administration is headed by principal Leonard Minkwic, who came to Cooley in January. He has been trying to straddle the wall between white teachers and parents and the angry black students. He also has tremendous pressure from the Board of Education to maintain law and order which goes by the name of "security and discipline" at Cooley.

He had tried to keep communications open with all factions. He went down to the precinct station when Greg Hicks was busted. He sent letters to all parents. He had frequent meetings with community people. But finally, April 20th, the pressure of being up against the wall was too much and he had to show where he was at. That's when he "excluded" the 22 black students and on Tuesday there were at least four uniformed cops in the building, meeting a demand that the Cooley teachers' union had made the week before.

The teachers are mostly white (approximately 100 out of 125). Some of them believe that the trouble is the result of a criminal conspiracy. Besides demanding the uniformed cops they also proposed that each teacher submit in writing any information about incidents and any identifications they could make of "troublemakers."

Minkic promised that identifications will lead to suspensions. The teachers also talked about identifying teachers who talk to the troublemakers. An anonymous leaflet which was reproduced in the teachers' lounge called for the dismissal of Eugene Cain, a young black teacher who is known to be in sympathy with the BSUF.

The school has taken on a prison-like atmosphere. Through some sort of implicit understanding, black students enter the school through the north door and white students through the south door. Every student must present his or her I.D. card just to enter the school!

I.D.s must also be presented to enter the lunchroom, scene of several incidents. There are at least 15 people hired just to be hall guards every day. There are eight security men from the Board of Education guarding the doors and halls. There are two or three plainclothes cops from police headquarters and uniformed cops pass in and out all day.

Because of this police state, along with the usual bullshit of daily insults and the tracking system, black students have been talking about establishing a freedom school in a church nearby. A group called Concerned Black Professionals is attempting to pull one together and hopes to have it in operation soon.

The struggle at Cooley will continue until black students and the black community have a real say in what happens there.

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