

# Strike Back

J.R. Kennedy

1970

Last week we went out on strike. We shut down universities and colleges across the country. Over 400 schools learned the power of the political strike. Hundreds of thousands of students moved militantly in rage over the Cambodia invasion and the Kent State murders. We trashed ROTC buildings, occupied administration centers, fought police, and made demands that put our schools against the wall.

This was the largest spontaneous, mass student protest in the history of the new left. On three days notice 200,000 people marched on Washington D.C., made their voices heard and fought with police in the streets. This rage was expressed not only by college students but by high school -students and by workers as well.

In California, Ronald Reagan, fearing militant mass uprisings, shut down every campus in the state. Almost half a million students there alone were out on the streets. The students that marched were demanding explanations and changes that struck at the core of the establishment machinery. Even Nixon and Agnew were surprised at the degree of the protest. They made concessions and agreements that they would have never made before. Their attitudes were conciliatory and promising.

At New York University students occupied the school's computer center and forced the administration to promise to raise \$100,000 in support of the Black Panther Defense Fund. At Syracuse University a similar demand to end all repression of political dissidents and to free all political prisoners set the tone of a student strike that was to go beyond all previous ones. The Syracuse students were also demanding a \$100,000 bond fund.

At most colleges and universities in the country, and at many high schools, students engaged the police in militant confrontations at some time during the strike. In California and Los Angeles, students stopped traffic on major freeways in protest. In New York, 2,000 demonstrators stopped traffic for over an hour. At Harvard, the computer center has been forced to shut down because of a workers' strike.

National Guardsmen have been sent to invade over twenty campuses. Every college and university in Boston is closed down. All 18 campuses of the Penn State system were shut down. The impact of these national actions will be more clearly seen in the future as students and workers continue to organize against a political and social system that has become intolerable, repressive, and suffocating.

The mass uprising against the increased escalation and repression has had international implications as well. Calcutta, India, Venezuela, Montreal, Rome, Australia and New Zealand all erupted in violent anti-war, anti-U.S. demonstrations in solidarity with American students and the Vietnamese people.

For all practical purposes the entire country was under a state of siege. The national news was dominated by the activities of the radical student movement. The heritage of this political-social system has been vested in the youth, particularly the college-trained youth. The mass student uprisings and rejection of this system that occurred during the last week were unsettling to middle Americans, to say the least.

Here in Detroit the action was heavy. Wayne State University was closed for three days. Macomb College sent a contingent of radicals to participate in the strike activities. Hampton and Post schools staged walk-outs. Cass Tech marched to the Wayne rally on Friday, led by NLF flags. Most high schools were represented, including Southfield-Lathrop, by students who walked out of their schools in spirited protest.

The momentum and movement of the strike was high energy. Detroit has seldom demonstrated such solidarity. At the rally at Wayne on Tuesday, 5,000 students cheered militant demands and voted to strike.

Yet, despite these obvious victories, a vague and undefined uneasiness pervaded the entire strike at Wayne State. Taking the national student uprisings as a whole, it is obvious that the impact of the movement was large, yet in attempting to analyze the long range effect many students were left with an unsatisfied feeling. We began to wonder how much we had really affected things. We began to wonder if our movement had become so commonplace and mechanized that we no longer inspired radical change.

We were demanding that the U.S. get out of Asia and that this country cease the repression of political dissent. We demanded an end to the murder of brothers and sisters engaged in protest, such as at Orangeburg, S.C., and at Kent State. Most people, including Nixon and Agnew, could agree with these demands. The problem was that these demands were too vague. They did not force the colleges to radically change their perspective or involvement in U.S. imperialism.

To effect those kinds of changes, to exercise the full potential of our mass political power, we must in the future organize further around concrete demands that the administrations of our colleges and high schools cannot so easily yield to. Wayne State or Macomb College are not deciding to invade Cambodia, nor are they giving the orders that killed the four students at Kent State.

They are, however, engaged in activities that imply consent to these atrocities. There are war recruiters on campus that help to sustain the slaughter of the Vietnamese people. There is wide-spread research on our campuses that allows genocide and repression to continue at higher and higher technological rates. There are examples of "urban imperialism" through which the university carries out the nation's economic policies of exploitation, degradation, and total disregard for poor people.

If we had been stronger on our demands in these areas—that is, if we had been prepared to fight for these demands—and if we had included the national demands as a basis for national solidarity, we would have had a series of concrete local issues to move on. We could have taken stands and staged confrontations around local issues, stating that we understood them to be products of the same mentality, thinking and policies that created the Cambodia escalation and Kent State.

Radical change and revolution in this country is clearly at a stage of organization and education, but mass movements around vague issues serve a limited function. People will always mobilize and move around demands that affect them directly. Students, or anyone else for that matter, like to work with tangible things that make the political abstractions they talk about make sense.

The Kent State struggle was organized around the question of ROTC on campus. It is true that the momentum of the strike was achieved because of the Cambodia invasion and campus speeches and rallies. Yet it became an important part of the conflict when the students struck out against a tangible focus of discontent and burned the ROTC building.

Here at Wayne State, this kind of action was stifled by the Student Mobilization Committee leadership. They organized and ran the strike in a very manipulative way. They forced attention away from those concrete, local demands that exist here and back toward those vague demands that can only take on sustained life through their local manifestations. They were afraid that hard demands would alienate the masses of people at Wayne. They, in effect, dismissed the notion that people are capable of drawing the connections between Wayne's policy of demolition of the surrounding community and this nation's policy of paving Vietnam.

Five thousand students attended a rally at Wayne last Tuesday. Four days later, at the march downtown, the same five thousand showed up. After four days of SMC organizing the strike had gained nothing in numbers. What had happened to all the high energy? It had been dissipated when the students at colleges and high schools around Detroit saw no movement that they could grasp hold of.

It is too easy to blame the students for their lack of concern and commitment. It is too easy to say that they lack moral dedication or that they are apathetic. The fact of the matter is that the students who did not wish to continue the strike did so because they could not see that they could change the course of the war in Cambodia any further than they had done already. They had registered their message and their solidarity with other students and saw no further purpose in continuing. The SMC presented no immediate demands up front that were left unchallenged or unsolved.

The initial high energy militancy and anger of the strike was further lost when the local strike leadership attempted to contain elements of the strike within their narrow definitions. This was done through “marshals.” What generally happened was that the marshalls served as an agent to control and stifle the action rather than as an agent to protect it. This error in role is an outgrowth of individuals who attempt to project in a very opportunistic and manipulative way their own political line onto a student uprising. People, moving on the issues that they feel affecting them, do not need to have those real feelings channeled and categorized by a political line.

The student strike at Wayne State, and the actions throughout the city, were together, strong, and simplified. The high level of empathy and energy could have been sustained longer and the effect had more impact, if there had been those immediate issues for people to relate to. Throughout the country the places where the greatest success was reached were places where students moved against concrete issues. They occupied or burned ROTC buildings. They attacked recruiters and supported workers on campus. That was when the shit came down. It came down when the demands affected the university. It came down when the demands could not be co-opted by a liberal speech by the university president. It came down when the movement could not be contained.

RIGHT ON, RED CRAZIES!!!

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