

East Detroit Protest

Fifth Estate Collective

1969

East Detroit High School was the scene Jan. 10 of a student sit-in protesting school policies there.

The action involved some 450 students and had demands ranging from dress and hair regulations and money wasted on “hall mothers” who patrol the school’s halls to a general demand for a student veto on school policies.

Faced with a massive show of protest, the school officials gave in on the dress regulations, but hedged on the other demands. As we go to press East Detroit High students are deciding on their next move.

The following is an interview with one of the participating students by a member of the National Organizing Committee, a group doing white working-class organizing in the Detroit area.

Question: When did the students first get together?

Answer: Last summer we started going to the Teen Center and sat outside rapping and listening to records. But the rent-a-cop started harassing us. They told us not to sit on the grass; said we had to go in the Center.

Q: Where did you go after they wouldn’t let you stay around the Center?

A: We’d go to the park but the rent-a-cop started giving us tickets for loitering. The curfew is at 10 p.m. but one night one of the local cops decided to kick us out of the park at 7:00. One guy stayed and sat in and the rent-a-cop dragged him to the station.

Q: Did the other kids do anything?

A: Yeah, we went to the cop station. They said the curfew wasn’t until 10 p.m. so the rent-a-cop couldn’t do anything. After that we felt that we were really starting to trust each other and we wanted to do something together.

Q: Did you get together in the park any more?

A: In September and October we went there at night and built fires in the cement curbs. It was like our own city. Then in mid-October the cops said there was a city ordinance that you couldn’t build fires at Kennedy Park unless you were 21 or had a parent with you.

Q: What happened after that?

A: A bunch of us started getting busted and kicked out of school for long hair and stuff like that. At first it was kind of bad cause nobody stuck together and no one even did anything about protesting it. Finally some of us decided we should really do something. So we started talking to all of our friends.

Q: Then you got together for a meeting?

A: Yeah. About one hundred twenty-five people came. We were mad about the busts and about some other things at school. We called someone from NOC (National Organizing Committee) to speak about SDS. We had a couple of meetings about what we should do.

Q: Then you took it to the principal?

A: They gave us the run-around—sent us all over the school to different people. The acting superintendent demanded our names. Some of us said forget it and walked out. After being pushed around for a while, we asked the Assistant Principal if he was going to do something about our demands or not. He wouldn’t answer.

A lawyer came in and told us about our rights. Finally we wrote down our demands and made leaflets stating what we were for and why.

Q: What did you do next?

A: We passed out leaflets stating our demands the next day. They pulled us in the office and gave us the third degree—like they wanted to know who the leaders were. But we said that there weren't any leaders—we were all in this together. They tried to threaten some of us by saying we wouldn't graduate.

Q: Then you sat in?

A: Yeah. After we went to the Administration and saw that they wouldn't do anything, we decided we had to act. During the sit-in we passed out leaflets on our legal rights with the central number of a lawyer to call in case we were busted.

Q: Who sat in?

A: At first it was mostly freaks. But soon after the rocks and straights were there too. We sat in for a while with four hundred others standing around. It was really cool. Then a committee went to talk to the student body president.

Q: Did you get your demands?

A: First they said they would announce the results before school closed. So we agreed to go to class. Then we found out that they weren't going to tell us what they decided until after school. This really messed us over because it made it harder for us to get the word around about what to do next.

Q: So what did they finally say?

A: They screwed us. The faculty subcommittee said we could wear blue jeans, boots, and mustaches.

Q: What's going to happen now?

A: Well—wait and see!

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