

Unrest at Mackenzie

Dena Clamage

1969

Mackenzie High School, located on Wyoming and Chicago, has been the scene of picketing, walkouts and militant assemblies since the beginning of the fall semester in September. The cause of the conflict, as in many Detroit inner-city schools, has been racial tension and hostility over poor education building up to a point where the whole thing had to explode. As a spokesman from the Black Council, a militant student-community organization, put it, "The spark lit the fuse that blew up the place."

The actual forms of the Mackenzie High struggle were not especially unique. Three weeks after school began, an assembly was held to introduce the new principal, Mr. Sidney Berkowitz. In the middle of the assembly, a number of students who were up-tight about the principal's "middle-of-the-road, it-takes-time" approach staged a walkout.

Several weeks later, on October 18, in an attempt to ease building tensions, the administration consented to a student assembly. At the assembly, members of the school's Afro-American History Club (AAHC) and the Black Council accused the Detroit Board of Education and Mackenzie teachers of racism, citing specific examples. At this point about twenty teachers walked out of school, forcing classes to be closed down for the day.

The following Monday, the students called their own assembly. Because of press distortion of what had happened and the tense atmosphere of the Friday meeting, they felt they needed more time to explain their positions and discuss further actions among themselves. Mr. Berkowitz, however, decided that the assembly couldn't take place since the students "didn't follow procedures."

While six students stayed to hassle with him at the front door of the auditorium, other students went around to the back door and started letting people in.

Since the fire curtain was down on the stage and access to the microphones was cut off, students again staged a walkout. They rallied in front of the school, where they put up a picket line and gave speeches for the rest of the day.

Five of the six student leaders were suspended for three days because, according to Mr. Berkowitz, "they defied my denial of their right to have an assembly." The sixth was permanently suspended on the grounds that he was a "persistent problem in terms of his relationship to the teachers and the other kids." The twenty teachers who walked out of the student assembly causing the school to be closed down only received letters in their files from the Board of Education, stating that their conduct was not entirely "proper."

There were specific incidents and grievances which touched off the conflict. One of the main problems was a white stage technician who on several occasions attacked students who happened to get in his way. At one point, he grabbed a black student who accidentally knocked over a ladder on stage and threw him off the stage—literally—over three rows of seats. As pressure built up, the technician was "removed" from the school.

But with few controls on the teachers, the pattern of brutality continues. Just recently a substitute hit a black female student on the head with a book for talking in class. No action was taken against him.

Another specific point of tension: Mackenzie High has a stretch of grass in front of it, which students refer to as the "campus." During good weather, the campus served as a focal point for students to gather together and talk.

In the middle of October the administration issued a directive that students could no longer gather on the campus. They assigned a study hall to serve as a “student lounge.” The new student lounge had a counselor’s office on either side. To make sure it was used for the proper purposes, another administrative directive prohibited talking in the study hall. Students went back to the campus.

Police harassment accompanied the renewed use of the campus. With two TMU’s and two patrolling squad cars, police began stopping to question students. As tensions increased, members of the Black Council began patrolling the police, dressed in uniforms of black berets, Levi jackets, and turtlenecks, armed with notebooks and a camera.

A few weeks ago, at the end of a Mackenzie-Murray Wright High School basketball game, as students were on their way home, “the pigs snatched a brother and started beating him.” This brutal police action was met with a barrage of bottles and rocks from the student onlookers.

Students at Mackenzie High see these specific incidents as part of a general pattern of racism and inferior education in Detroit inner-city schools. Almost every day, black students come up against fresh examples of racism in their textbooks and in their teachers. As the Black Council spokesman described it, “Our American history textbook is red, white and blue on the outside and white, white, and white on the inside. The only part in the textbook that is not Anglo-Saxon is the part on slavery, plus a few mentions of Martin Luther King and Ralph Bunche.”

Although there are now four courses on black history (two of which are taught by white teachers), the regular history textbooks leave out mention of black achievements in American history. Perhaps this is because the people who write the texts believe, along with one of the white history teachers at Mackenzie, that “Black people never achieved anything.”

But black education is not the only thing that puts Mackenzie students uptight. “All students are niggers—black and white. Even if the knowledge in school was adequate, the prison atmosphere would make it impossible to learn. The tensions would build up again to a revolt.”

The “prison atmosphere” at Mackenzie has been reinforced since the fall walkouts by the addition of four men to the high school staff. The principal calls these men “teacher aides.” The students call them an “occupying army.”

Mr. Berkowitz describes the function of these teacher aides as follows: “After the upsets, there seemed to be a lot of difficulty in getting kids to end up in their classes or study halls. We felt that the presence of the aides would encourage students to be where they are supposed to be.”

According to the students, this form of “encouragement” could more properly be called intimidation. Students report incidents in which they have been physically threatened by these men, incidents which have almost erupted into full-scale fights. Mr. Berkowitz denies any knowledge of this. Whether the students’ allegations are completely true or not, it is clear that the teacher aides do have an intimidating effect on the student body. Given the fact that they were brought in directly after the “upset,” this effect is probably not completely accidental.

Since the fall walkouts, things have been fairly calm at Mackenzie High. Partially because of the teacher aides, the struggle has “gone underground.” But as the Black Council spokesman described it, “It’s still fermenting. This school is going to be restructured or closed down.”

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