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Matt Muchowski
DePaul University

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Cover Page Footnote
This article is from an earlier iteration of Diálogo which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."

This article is available in Diálogo: https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo/vol11/iss1/6
HIGHLIGHTS OF ANTI-RACIST STRUGGLE AT DEPAUL UNIVERSITY

Matt Muchowski
DePaul University Alumni

DePaul University, in its over 100 years as an institution, has had many fascinating struggles over multiculturalism, racism, and how the school dealt with non-white students, faculty, staff and the community. One of the main themes in the book I am writing, “A People’s History of DePaul University,” is the history of how the school bowed to the pressure of progressive anti-racist activists over the years. Space limits me from making an in depth look at those struggles here, but I would like to highlight three events which were the focus of a panel I spoke on at the conference, “Memory and Voices of Defiance, Hope and Solidarity: Struggles for Social Justice and Equality in the U.S.A.” The Panel, “DePaul Activism: Before and After Graduation,” featured James Hammonds, the first President of the Black Student Union, Victoria Romero, one of the founders of the DePaul Alliance for Latino Empowerment, and unfortunately Les Dombai, one of the leaders of a United Farm Workers solidarity campaign was unable to attend.

BLACK STUDENT UNION SEIZES SCHMITT ACADEMIC CENTER (SAC)

The first wave of Black students to attend DePaul followed World War II, with an influx of students through the GI Bill. DePaul had a long standing policy of cautious integration. They would allow Black students to attend, but would set a higher bar for them to pass to be accepted, and would actively discourage Black students from attending. DePaul’s original charter called for no religious test to be used in admissions, but that was shelved as the school required that any Black student who applied would have to be Catholic before being accepted. The standards for Black students were set higher than other students and even if they passed those they would be sent a letter discouraging them from attending DePaul because they might find an atmosphere hostile to Black students.

In the 1960’s, those restrictions fell by the way side, and hundreds of Black students enrolled at DePaul. They became politically active in groups like the DePaul chapter of the Congress on Racial Equality and in the late 1960’s, formed the Black Student Union.

BSU was active in many ways. They collected books and funds to donate African and African-American books to the DePaul library, they organized a campaign for the first Black Homecoming candidate, and even performed Black plays. BSU members were also concerned about issues in broader society and how they affected DePaul. BSU’s first President, James Hammonds, would speak out against the war in Vietnam, and members of the group were supportive of the Young Lords struggle against gentrification in the Lincoln Park Neighborhood DePaul was located in. In one of his articles in the school newspaper, the DePaulia, Hammonds declared that “BSU is a Black Power organization” explaining that it sought to empower historically dis-privileged Black people.

1968-1969 was a school year of sustained protest and confrontation across the US and at DePaul, it was BSU that was at the front of such upheaval. BSU had made demands of the DePaul administration in the previous school year, calling for more Black studies classes and other concerns. The school made a committee to look at such issues, and not much was done.

On May 7th, 1969, at high noon, BSU President Steve Berry and other BSU members stood in the SAC Pit (a popular hang out and study area in the Schmitt Academic Center) and read a list of demands. They called for more Black Studies courses, an increase in Black and Latino students, an end to Gentrification and the war in Vietnam, for the school to end a lecture series named after DePaul alum Mayor Daley, reparations for descendants of slaves among other issues. They wanted an answer by noon the next day.

Students gathered in the SAC Pit the next day at noon, and it was announced that the administration would have a response by 1:00 pm. At 1:00, the school pretty much refused all the demands and placed the blame for lack of progress on BSU members for not cooperating with the Committee on Human Relations created the year before.

After the University’s response was read to the 300 students in the SAC Pit, BSU members returned to their office on campus. Steve Berry went to talk to some deans and arranged a meeting, but when he returned to tell BSU members this, they were coming to the realization that the deans did not have the real power. They went to talk to the President of the school, Father Cortelyou.

At 3:00, about 40 students, BSU members and several white allies, entered the office of the Dean of the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Ed Schillinger, on the top floor of SAC. They told him that they wanted to meet with Cortelyou. Schillinger told them he was unavailable. They told him that they would stay in
his office until they met with Cortelyou.

Cortelyou offered to meet with six students, but BSU members rejected this, as they wanted him to meet with all of them. Later that evening, Schillinger asked the students if he could leave, and they agreed to let him go. They then took over the building.

James Hammonds would later call it a spontaneous uprising, where SAC was seized by the people. The students went door to door, telling people they could either stay or go, but that they would be taking control of SAC.

The next morning, students came to DePaul, prepared to attend class, but found the doors barred and signs posted by BSU. BSU had selected Francine Stewart to be their outside negotiator. After several white students became aggressive towards her, including threatening to seize the building back from BSU with baseball bats and the president of the DePaul Republicans calling her the N word, BSU put in some phone calls to have their allies come and support. Members of the Black Panthers and Young Lords, including Fred Hampton and Cha Cha Jimenez came and acted as security for Stewart.

After several hours of negotiation, BSU was starting to realize that they weren’t prepared for a long term occupation and agreed to end the occupation that day, May 9th, on the condition that they would get a public forum with Father Cortelyou.

A few days later the forum took place, but not much improved, the school agreed to admit more minority students, but not nearly as many as BSU wanted or on the conditions they proposed, the school did eventually have a Black Studies Program, but it was canceled in 1971, only to be revived in 2003. The Lincoln Park area is now almost completely gentrified, reparations still haven’t been paid, and the war in Vietnam wouldn’t end for another 7 years.

Despite the few immediate gains, the occupation became a symbol of resistance to corporate liberalism. According to James Hammonds it gave all those who participated a new spirit of courage and resistance. It showed that many different groups:

Black students, progressive white students, Lincoln Park community members, could unite to press for social change. Today many of those who took part in the occupation are still involved in community work. James Hammonds volunteers at Eyes on Austin, a community group which helps people who have been released from prison find jobs. Francine Stewart is now married and goes by Francine Soilunas, she teaches law and advises minority students at Kent State University. Cha-Cha Jimenez runs a summer camp for youth.

**SI SE PUDE! DEPAUL JOINS UNITED FARM WORKERS BOYCOTT**

Students at DePaul in the 1970’s led an effective boycott in solidarity with the United Farm Workers union, led by Cesar Chavez. Migrant workers in California faced harsh conditions, working long hours, being paid little and facing poisoning by pesticides used. As the union reached out across the country for support in boycotting anti-union companies that sold lettuce and grapes, DePaul students became active.

In the 1972-73 school year, students Ray Rittenhouse, Les Dombai, and Mark Andrews made the UFW cause their own. With little opposition they were able to have SGA pass a resolution supporting the boycott on California lettuce. Following that, they met with the director of food services, Barry Scerbo. Scerbo explained to them that if they could get 50% of the full time day students on the Lincoln Park campus to sign petitions in support of the boycott, he would cease ordering the lettuce in question.

For the next several weeks, students collected signatures on a petition. They would sit at tables in SAC and introduce students with information and ask them to sign a petition.

Few students opposed them. The only sign of opposition came from anti-union ads wine companies ran in the DePaulia and in a racist column from a student which asked, “why don’t they stay in the fields where they belong?” He called the migrant farmers stupid for not finding other jobs and asserted that the workers who died because of pesticides, died like the bugs that they were. With an opposition so out of touch with reality and compassion as that, it’s no wonder that the pro-union activists were able to collect over 4,000 signatures and have Student Government Association expand its support of the boycott to include California grapes. On February 27, 1974, several student groups and Latino students met with cafeteria management. The students talked about the campaign and why they were doing it,
and showed management the number of signatures they had collected. Without any hesitation, the manager decided to start ordering union lettuce. The meeting ended in 15 minutes. "For the UFW, it was one of the quickest and most pleasing agreements to boycott lettuce they had ever made."

This was one of the first, if not the first, time DePaul joined a boycott because of a social issue. Activists would press the school to join other boycott throughout the years, against Apartheid South Africa and Coca-Cola, among others, but few would achieve such resounding success as the UFW boycott did at DePaul. We can learn much from the boycott.

Ray Rittenhouse went on to be Student Government president and a lawyer. Les Dombai became a lawyer specializing in Social Security Disability advocacy. Domabi has since become an administrative judge for social security disability claims.

LATINO STUDENTS RISING AND THE ORIGINS OF THE CULTURAL CENTER

Latino students had been organizing at DePaul since the 1970’s. While there were some who would get involved in political activism, for the most part, the different Latino clubs were social clubs. In 1994, the same year the Zapatista National Army of Liberation began its uprising, members of the DePaul Alliance for Latino Empowerment took a stand. According to Victoria Romero, DAME was used as more than a social club, members of DAME intended to distribute the University’s resources to the under-privileged in the Latino community. They took influence from the Young Lords and wanted to fight for justice.

This led them to confront conditions at the school for Latino students. As Victoria Romero explained it, the school would talk a lot about multiculturalism at the time, but when it came to adequately funding and staffing multi-cultural projects, the school fell short. At the time, the school had the Office of Multicultural Student Affairs whose main goal was recruitment and retention of minority students. Members of DAME became frustrated with the office because of the high turnover rate of Latino advisors in the office. They tried to find out why the advisors were dismissed but were told it was none of their business by the director of OMSA. In fact this was only one of many concerns they had. They thought the mission of OMSA was too small, they wanted a fully staffed cultural center for students to use with resources and meeting rooms for student groups.

On the morning of May 4th, 1994, students gathered and marched to the OMSA office. The director was not there, but several staff members were. The DAME members and their allies told the staff members that they were occupying the office and should leave. After the staff left, the activists began to fortify the floor, pushing furniture into the stairwells, placing chairs in the elevator doors so they couldn’t shut or move, and placing students as guards near all the entrances and exits to the floor. They began looking through the files in the OMSA office, and saw how what money they did get, was often spent in ways that didn’t benefit students.

At first the Vice-President of Student Affairs Jim Doyle came to speak with them, they sent him away, telling him that they wanted to speak with the President of the school, Father Minogue. They got their meeting with Minogue that day and began negotiations with the school. According to Victoria Romero, at one point Minogue threatened to expel her, weeks before her graduation. She stood her ground though, explaining that she didn’t want to graduate from a school that treated her so poorly. That night, Minogue actually sent them a pizza. They hadn’t brought any food and readily ate it, but it didn’t fill their appetite for justice.

Word had gotten out about the occupation and one hundred some students showed up the next day to show their support. They continued negotiations with the school but according to Victoria Romero, certain elements in the administration were trying to divide the students. Since the director of OMSA was Black, they were trying to paint the issue as Latino’s vs. Blacks. As Romero explained though, “It’s not a black and brown issue, it’s a green issue.” The students occupying OMSA wanted more money and funding for multicultural students, and student groups as a whole and they saw the way OMSA was being run at the time as a divide and conquer institute run by someone who had Black skin but was often a tool of the administration.

They decided to end the occupation after the school agreed to create an advisory council for OMSA. The occupation of OMSA would be the inspiration for many progressive gains made in the next few years. The next year, Black students would seize the DePaulia to protest against its racist coverage. In the 1995-96 school year, DePaul opened the Cultural Center. When it received its new location in the new student center, Romero and other alumni activists were invited back to the dedication of the Founders Room, dedicated to the students and student groups who were the inspiration for the Cultural Center.
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BLACK STUDENT UNION:


Black Student Union. Student Affairs: Campus Unrest. DePaul University Library Special Collections and Archives.


The DePaulia. May 19, 1969.


UNITED FARM WORKERS BOYCOTT:
Interview with Les Dombai.


DALE OCCUPIES OFFICE OF MULTICULTURAL STUDENT AFFAIRS:


MATT MUCHOWSKI is a DePaul University alumni and is currently working on a book tentatively entitled, A People’s History of DePaul University. Muchowski, while at DePaul, was actively involved against the war and sweatshops. For more information about current DePaul student activism in social justice visit www.depaulasu.net.

To contact: Insurgency2009@riseup.net

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