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### *CRE Hosts RU Activist? An Intergenerational Teach-in on Campus Activism*

On Thursday, April 28, 2016, the Center for Race and Ethnicity hosted a teach-in event called “RU Activist,” to address the challenges and possibilities for solidarity in organizing. The event was the final meeting in the Teach-in Series, *A People's History*, organized by the student-led coalition Reclaim Revolution. This coalition took shape in response to University’s 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary slogan, “Rutgers: Revolutionary for 250 Years.” Its members are committed to encouraging Rutgers to live up to this claim. With this end in mind, Reclaim Revolution brings together student activists and organizers from different campuses to pursue goals that include drawing attention to the struggles of minority groups on campus and opposing attempts to erase the University’s past history of discrimination toward members of those groups. (You can read more about the Reclaim Revolution coalition here:

<http://newbrunswicktoday.com/article/coalition-aims-change-conversation-rutgers%E2%80%99-250th-anniversary>)

#### **BUILDING ON EARLIER EVENTS**

Reclaim Revolution builds on existing initiatives on campus such as CRE’s co-hosted event “Black on the Banks,” which took place in November, and highlighted the experiences of African American students at Douglass College and Rutgers in the 1960s and 70s. Previous teach-ins hosted by the group have sought to try to understand the layout of campus activism, raising awareness of



past campus activism among students, and highlighting current activism at Rutgers. (For more information about earlier teach-ins see:

<http://www.dailytargum.com/article/2016/03/critical-conversations-occur-during-collaborative-teach-ins>

The RU Activist event was planned by Rosemary Ndubizu, a graduate assistant at the CRE, who worked in collaboration with affiliates with Rutgers' Graduate Organizing Committee and the Graduate Students Association, as well as undergraduate student organizers. This event also built on interest and conversations that took place at the CRE’s November, 2015 #studentblackout, a teach-in focused on student resistance and protest.

Nearly 40 people were in attendance, including Rutgers undergraduates, graduate students, faculty, and alumni, as well as faculty and students from neighboring colleges. The primary goal of the RU Activist event was to bring together undergraduate and graduate students who are engaged in social organizing for different causes and discuss how they can find common ground. The event was inspired by the awareness that student-organizers have few opportunities to get together to explore what visions and common goals they might share and discuss building coalitions across their differences--in other words, to practice solidarity. As the event's discussion soon illuminated, solidarity requires such meetings. Collaborative work invariably requires activists to develop a shared political vision of alternatives to current oppressive systems. The event centered around identifying barriers to solidarity on campus and ways to overcome these obstacles.

## **“FAUX SOLIDARITY”**

The event opened with an exercise designed to address these issues. Four graduates led a role-play of “faux solidarity,” which demonstrated the potential pitfalls of organizing across differences. This activity served as a spring-board for the roundtable discussion featuring Dr. Premilla Nadasen, Associate Professor of History at Barnard College, and Khadijah White, Assistant Professor of Journalism and Media Studies at Rutgers University's School of Communication and Information, as well as Rutgers undergraduate activists



*Premilla Nadasen, History, Barnard College*

Taqwa Brookins, Monica Torres, and Meryem Uzumcu. The roundtable session fostered lively discussion about the everyday struggles and possibilities for advancing solidarity praxis at Rutgers. The speakers were asked to theorize the connections between graduate students' worker rights, undergraduates' fight for increased institutional power, community-based efforts to fight police brutality and gentrification, and international struggles for liberation and peace.

Nadasen, a scholar-activist and an organizer for over thirty years, reflected on her experiences with campus activism and issues of solidarity. Born in South Africa and raised in the U.S., Nadasen attended the University of Michigan, where she became a passionate anti-apartheid activist. In taking on this cause, Nadasen and other anti-apartheid activists at Michigan, could not help but become aware of the institutional practices that connected Michigan to South Africa. “We realized that racism on campus and the system of apartheid in South Africa were connected issues, so we moved to addressing domestic racism.”

Accordingly, she and other student activists began to address inequities with their university's admissions and low enrollment of students of color, and also developed a critique of Michigan's refusal to award Nelson Mandela an honorary degree because the administration deemed him to be a “terrorist.” Moreover, they also began to think about other international issues, such as what was happening in Israel to the Palestinians, which was very similar to the White South African Government: in short, they began to view these problems as related. “The organizing work was led by women of color, and the question of solidarity was at the center of our political work.”

When asked how she developed a robust analysis of international issues and the connections to domestic issues, Nadasen reported that she and her colleagues had regular reading groups, and they used Black feminist, anti-capitalist, and anti-racist lenses to analyze and address these problems. They had organizing and leadership principles that centered women of color's leadership and practiced international solidarity. She highlighted the importance of gathering together to learn how to understand and engage with oppression. She stated, “I was not born with any kind of analysis, but I read, and read with others. We talked about what it all means and how all these issues are connected—environmental and racial justice issues, LGBT and racial justice issues.”

## **SOCIAL MEDIA: BRANDING THE SELF?**

Khadijah White spoke about the anti-solidarity practices that are common-

place in our current historical moment. She pointed to the culture of branding, and in particular the use of social media as a way to brand the self. She cited DeRay Mckesson, and his signature blue vest worn in all his Twitter photos, a former Black Lives Matter activist who is now running for mayor of Baltimore as an example of this. White argued that DeRay's use of twitter taps into the promotional culture that has become rampant even amongst important social movements. After becoming a symbol for the Black Lives Matter movement, DeRay used "his brand" to promote himself as a



*Khadijah White, Journalism and Media Studies, Rutgers School of Communication and Information*

political candidate. "When a person links himself to a campaign, and centers the self rather than the movement, solidarity can crumble." White then spoke about the importance of thinking of the social movements that we are involved with as being intersectional—and also analyzing how oppressions are intersectional. By way of example, White spoke about her involvement in the Occupy Movement, which takes on issues that are not directly related to contesting power of banks and multinational corporations. Activities White conducted as an Occupy activist included participating in a sit in to

prevent an elderly African American woman from being evicted from her home. When she was involved with Occupy, she was always aware that many members of the 99 percent were Black, Queer, and poor. She referred to a slogan employed within the Occupy Movement: "My protest will be intersectional or it will be nothing." One Rutgers alumna who is now a doctoral student at Princeton asked whether there is value in keeping white people out of black organizational spaces. She asked, "Do white people belong in Black activist spaces, or is there value and a benefit to keeping a space monolithic?" Professor White responded, "If you're going to have a monolithic space, you need a reason." She acknowledged that Black students need a safe space; that as an undergraduate she was in a Black union because she needed a place to be angry, to be sad, and to share a common experience. Having this space as one that was meant for Black students only was important. "But, as an organizer, you need to draw upon all the people who show up. You need to use all of the resources available to you. Everybody has a place because you need as many hands as possible."

Nadasen's analysis of the issue of transracial solidarity was similar. Organizers have to ask "What is the goal of these monolithic meetings?" she observed,

explaining that, "If the goal is to create safe spaces where people of color can connect and get needed social support, than monolithic spaces make sense. But if it's about creating social transformation, we need an all-hands-on-deck approach."

## **RACE AND REPRESENTATION WITHIN STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS**

One of the undergraduate organizers then asked about issues of race and representation within student organizations. "One major obstacle I see to solidarity is that people don't understand each other," maintained Taqwa Brookins, an undergraduate activist with the Black Lives Matter movement. She welcomed solidarity across race lines but warned white students who wish to support black activism on campus: "If you want to practice solidarity, don't speak for other people. First educate yourself about your privilege in other people's spaces." Solidarity can take a variety of forms, she further observed, citing the example of Palestinian activists, who showed effective and respectful support for Black Lives Matter protestors during the uprisings in Ferguson by giving protestors advice on how to deal with tear-gas.

Meryem Uzumcu, an undergraduate activist and organizer with the Students for Justice in Palestine, pointed to the importance of identifying common sources of power across contexts. She drew attention to the connections between the Israeli Defense Forces and the increasingly militarized police force in the U.S., arguing that Israel is a

laboratory for what the police can do in the U.S. Uzumcu contended, “It is important to think about how power is being translated in these spaces.” She then highlighted the ways that the language of diversity and privatization is being used by the university to subvert people’s ability to protest and unite.



*Students, faculty and community members filled the room to discuss issues of campus activism*

Monica Torres, an undergraduate student activist with Reclaim Revolution brought a different perspective to the conversation by asking “How can one find solidarity in oneself?” and “How does the university separate us?” She argued that the university often stands in the way of allowing students to fully realize their intersectional selves. She pointed out that Latina and black studies classes are still not part of the core curriculum. As a multiracial person she asked “How are we, as intersectional people, living solidarity? How are we coming to terms with the disparate aspects of ourselves?” With Latina, Asian, and Native American roots, Torres has often struggled to understand how she can move through organizations connected with these groups and bring the students from them together.

## THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

Rosemary Ndubizu then asked “How have post 1970s institutional changes reshaped our possibilities for contemporary activism and solidarity?” In particular, she questioned how solidarity can be practiced on university campuses amidst the current neoliberal moment of declining state support for public education. Dr. Janice Fine of the School of Management and Labor Relations responded to this question. “We are living in a very bewildering moment. We are now watching as public education is nothing of what it used to be.” Fine noted that in the 1960s, CUNY schools were largely state-supported and free to students, whereas today, tuition supplies almost half of the system’s revenues, and less than 20 percent of the funds for the universities come from the state. “The university structure has completely changed due to neoliberalism.” Fine further noted that issues of funding impact educational opportunities at state universities in all sorts of ways. As a professor at Rutgers, she faces increasing difficulties offering broadly interdisciplinary courses, since departments receive less funding when their courses are cross-listed within multiple departments.

Fine did share some positive experiences, and offered some hope for solidarity. In particular,

she expressed optimism about an organizing strategy that has come out of Chicago and Minneapolis, which is called Bargaining for the Common Good. Fine explains, “Groups with different issues but similar targets work together. People are not asked to drop what is important to them, but by finding their commonalities, they go together and have the same target.”



*Janice Fine, Associate Professor of Labor Studies and Employment Relations at the School of Management and Labor Relations, RU-NB (photo courtesy of NJ Courier Post Online)*

Nadasen spoke about how universities quell student activism through the creation of student government and interdisciplinary programs such as women’s studies and Africana studies. These have become outlets for student dissatisfaction about inequities in higher education.

A lively discussion took place regarding the definition and use of intellectualism in political movements. Ndubizu questioned whether university curricula tend to ignore political analyses that enable students to build social movements worthy of challenging contemporary forms of oppression and exploitation. Dilara Demir, a doctoral candidate in Sociology, spoke about her experiences as a student organizer in her native Turkey. She addressed the ways that the urgency of “doing” protests and other political actions disrupted the

important work of reading important texts and becoming more intellectually engaged. When one is concerned with political action, intellectual pursuits can oftentimes go by the wayside.

In her commentary on intellectualism, Nadasen pointed to the fact that what is taught at the university should not be taken up as intellectualism. She suggested that students look at texts such as the Combahee River Collective Statement, Robin Kelley's recent article in the Boston Review and Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's book, "[The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study](#)", (full open access book available at

[http://www.minorcompositions.info/wp-](http://www.minorcompositions.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/undercommons-web.pdf)

[content/uploads/2013/04/undercommons-web.pdf](http://www.minorcompositions.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/undercommons-web.pdf)) in which the authors argue that universities are not sites of revolutionary thought. Nadasen reminded students of Marney and Moten's message: "We must continue to be *in, but not of*, the university."

After a rich discussion, attendees moved into break-out sessions. In groups of 4-5, each group was asked to respond to questions such as "What is your definition of solidarity," "What are some barriers to solidarity," and "How can solidarity be practiced on campus?" The groups later came together in a town hall meeting to share their findings and to think through how to move forward together. One group defined solidarity as building coalition by first recognizing privilege. Another group defined solidarity as building coalition by first recognizing privilege. Another



*Small Group Break-out Session*

defined it as institutional and cultural memory. One definition that seemed to strike a chord with many is "Decolonial Love": healing that insisted on being anti-imperialist in our care for one another.



*Small groups at work*

Groups identified several barriers to solidarity including institutional problems such as fragmented resources, institutional whiteness, and hidden or embedded knowledge sources. In thinking of how to practice solidarity in a practical way, one group suggested using technology to create reading groups so members of different groups can read common texts. Another suggestion was to identify a common enemy, and to know the enemy's tactics. Building on the work of "Bargaining for the Common Good," it is important

to work together towards unity, even if there are differences. Another suggestion was to use Participatory Action Research to involve community members in organizing.



*Groups report information to each other*

The event concluded with discussions on follow-up events, which will include online reading groups and meetings which will begin in the fall. Silent Night, a local spoken word artist and longtime New Brunswick activist ended the meeting with a few of his pieces.

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