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Oakland Teach-in Galvanizes Students and Teachers



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Oakland students are talking about the war.

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By Catherine Capellaro

Youth activists, teachers, and organizers are encouraging students to question the government's line on Iraq. In some cases, that means asking how the U.S. government can afford to go to war when the schools are crumbling. It means educating students about their right to resist military recruiting. And, as a result of the ongoing education, Oakland students showed up in force to a massive demonstration on January 18 in San Francisco.

Oakland is a troubled city. While affluent families reside in the hills, the area known as the "flatlands" is plagued by poverty, drugs, and gangs. Oakland has one of the highest murder rates in the country. There were 113 homicides in 2002 — a 33 percent increase from the year before. The schools are experiencing a massive fiscal crisis, which has led to a threatened state takeover. Students of color, who form more than 90 percent of the student body, are heavily recruited by the military. And the high homicide rate means that many students are unfortunately all too familiar with losing family members to violence.

EVOLUTION OF THE TEACH-IN

On November 13, the board of the Oakland Unified School District voted unanimously to host a districtwide "teach-in" about a potential war in Iraq. The board's resolution called for "city-wide public education at the school level concerning the background of the current crisis concerning Iraq, the options available to the United States government for attempting to resolve that crisis, and the likely

consequences of a United States military attack on Iraq."

Dan Siegel, who led protests against the Vietnam war when he was student body president at the University of California-Berkeley in 1969, is now a member of the school board. Siegel says he introduced the resolution for the teach-in " because I think the issue of a potential war with Iraq is one of the most important issues we've faced in many years. I think it's important that people who are affected are educated so they can learn about the consequences of such a war."



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Siegel says that education on the war includes questioning how the government can spend billions of dollars for war when funds for schools and social services are being slashed. He also worries that U.S. troops will disproportionately represent poor communities like Oakland.

The board struggled a bit to pass a resolution that all its members and the administration could support. "The first draft of the resolution people thought was too political or too strongly indicative of an anti-war position and too prescriptive," says Siegel. The board tabled the first resolution and eventually arrived at wording that the board and the administration could live with. Although the resources and presenters for the teach-in were made available at all grade levels, the teach-in wasn't mandatory and students or teachers could opt-out if they wished.

"Now it's less anti-war and more about speaking to the dangers and consequences of war, and we left it up to the schools to figure out what kind of programs they wanted."

"Teachers and students have bought in and taken their own initiative," says Siegel. "It's democratic and powerful when people take up ideas instead of waiting to be organized or told what to do."

MEDIA SPIN

The mainstream media has taken a distinctly patronizing tone when discussing the Oakland teach-in, and much of the coverage has focused on the "lack of balance" offered to students. On January 15, Bill O'Reilly, host of the Fox News show "The O'Reilly Factor" raked Siegel over the coals for not providing a pro-war perspective. "If I were Rod Paige, the secretary of education, I'd cut your funding, unless you could prove to me that you weren't propagandists," said O'Reilly, "because I don't want to pay for your curriculum of inculcating kids to your point of view."



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Siegel calls the balance issue "somewhat bogus."

"Even if the speakers from one day aren't balanced, the kids will read the newspaper and see the TV and get the other side. I don't think there is any possibility that the kids won't get the pro-war position living in the U.S." says Siegel.

The organizers of the teach-in emphasized that the event reflected multiple perspectives, although most of the presenters agreed the United States shouldn't launch a preemptive war against Iraq. The State department and U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein's office declined invitations to participate. Judi Hirsch, 33-year teaching veteran and a member of the Peace and Justice Caucus of the Oakland Education Association, coordinated an impressive list of more than 80 presenters for the teach-in. "We have lots of Vietnam vets and Veterans for Peace," says Hirsch, "We have professors who teach political philosophy, we have people that work on connections with oil, depleted uranium. We have a lot of people who are Muslims; we have people who've been to the Middle East; we've got local elected officials; we've got Not In Our Name people, International ANSWER; we have a woman who has been working on trying to end the sanctions; we have students, teachers, we have artists in every school, hip-hop artists, political artists, spoken word, a comedian; we've got armament experts; and we have an ROTC guy who thinks war is stupid."

A few days before the teach-in, Hirsch hosted a training for more than 60 presenters, which focused on how to connect with students, "I just try to get them to see that it shouldn't be a lecture; it should be a conversation. You know, let them ask you questions. You feel them out. Kids need to come to their own conclusions."

THE TEACH-IN

Oakland High School is just a stone's throw from the massive freeways that crisscross the city of Oakland. It's a dilapidated fortress, teeming with students of every race and ethnicity. Near the end of the last period of the day, the library is packed with students and teachers. Phil Gardiner, a representative of the Black Radical Congress and a graduate of Oakland Tech High, is finishing a presentation on resources. He fields questions about oil dependency, and then asks the students if they know where the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers are. Gardiner uses this question to introduce the concept of water as a precious resource that can also drive foreign and domestic policy. Many of the students are paying attention, but it's the end of the day, and some seem poised to exit.

Then Cassie Lopez takes the microphone. Lopez, who teaches Spanish at Oakland High, is an imposing figure, with a flair for oratory. "Let me ask you guys a question, do you think you can make a difference?" asks Lopez. About a third of the students raise their hands; a few more lift them tentatively. "How many of you guys think you can't make a difference?" At least a dozen students raise their hands. "Okay, let me tell you something, you all can make a difference because everything that we enjoy, even public education, was fought for. There was a time when public education was only for a certain group of people. That was fought for. The right to vote was fought for. Unemployment insurance was fought for. Everything you think about when you say 'well, this is a great country,' guess what? Somebody fought for it. And it was a lot of young people that got on the front lines and fought for it."

As Lopez continues, even the students who've been slumping in their chairs start to sit up straighter. She talks about how it felt to be told to sit on the back of the bus and seeing dogs bite protesters in

the Civil Rights Movement.

"The president of the United States says 'I'm going to war' and you got hundreds and thousands of men and people ready to go over there. ... Why not talk about this when 35 percent of the military are people of color? First ones to sign up. All I'm saying is, you have a right to know. So let's start knowing. Let's start caring. Let's start loving each other too."

As Lopez steps back, the students clap heartily. An African-American student steps forward to encourage her peers to participate in the Jan. 18 demonstration. "We really have a role in this, we really have an opportunity to change things. We were out there, the youth rally in Seattle, all 50,000 of us. We stopped the World Trade Organization from meeting. We got beat up by the police, we got tear gassed and pepper sprayed but we stopped the meeting from happening. And we changed the world, again and again."

YOUTH ORGANIZING

Oakland is home to many youth organizations whose members have breathed new life into the peace movement. Youth Together is an example of what happens when young people develop organizational infrastructures. Youth Together, with a full-time staff of 15, does site-based organizing in a number of high schools, including Oakland, Berkeley, and Richmond. Their strategy is to train youth organizers to connect issues of racial justice, street violence, and school funding. They are funded by grants, about half from the government and half from private foundations.

Youth Together is focusing on the issue of military recruitment in the schools. Berkeley site organizer Jan Attia says the military is a huge presence in East Bay high schools. "The school is so militarized in so many ways, with security cameras and metal detectors. The school seems to be pretty friendly about letting the military come onto campus and put a tank right in the middle of the playground. The students have really picked up the draft information as the most important thing to understand."

Attia explains that students are struck by how young people of color are targeted by military recruiters. "The statistics of how over 50 percent of the front line is confined to people of color is something that sticks out to them. So when we did our anti-war training Saturday here in-house with all of the staff involved, they walked away feeling like their piece of activism around it immediately needed to be talking about the No Child Left Behind act and getting their fellow students to do opt-out forms. (See article, page 9.) So, this week they're going around and passing those out to teachers and students and getting really good feedback around it. Youth really do understand that it impacts them directly, and then they connect it further with the violence they're experiencing on the streets."

Once they get access to information outside of the mainstream media, young people can begin to mobilize each other around issues, says Kimberley Aceves, Youth Together's executive director. "We are providing the information and the tools to young people. Then they go out and spread the message. I think a lot of people at the beginning of this were turned off by a lot of adults talking about how we should go to war. What we're doing is saying, 'How do we get this message out to young people so they can go out, shape the message in a way that other young people of color can hear.'"

Hassan says the military recruitment is only one part of the picture for inner-city high schoolers. Youth Together also wants to galvanize students around issues of testing and tracking. "If there's limited resources, if there's no books, if there's no teachers, if you can't pass this test you drop out of school - oh, well, here's the military. It's right there. I point that out to the students, 'Why do you have recruiters here but you don't have anybody coming here to give you a job, except one day out of the year when there's a job fair. And who's coming? The police and the military again.'"

RALLY AGAINST THE WAR

For many organizers of the teach-in, getting students to show up to protest the war on January 18 was a visible symbol that their message was getting through. At 10 a.m., the Bay Area Rapid Transit station in West Oakland is vibrating with exuberance. Students and teachers are gathering together to ride the train to San Francisco to attend the march that is part of a nationwide day of protest. Organizers circulate through the crowd, trying to keep groups together. Students slap stickers on each other, and hand out signs. When it's time to board, a Youth Together contingent starts chanting,

"Get on the train. Get on the train." The trains are jam-packed with protesters.

At Embarcadero, where the march is slated to begin, the East Bay students start chanting even as they emerge from the subway stairwell: "Bush is on crack; Don't bomb Iraq!" An enormous crowd is gathering, spanning every age, race, and background. A number of young people say this is their first protest, and they credit Youth Together and the Oakland teach-in with opening their eyes to the situation. Two hours before the march is slated to begin, the first protesters are pushed to move down Market Street, the main route, to make room for the throngs that are arriving. Although the police initially estimated the crowd at 55,000, they have since upgraded their estimate to 150,000 to 200,000. For the students, being a part of such a diverse and unified protest, is clearly keeping them pumped with energy.

ONGOING WORK

The organizers of the Oakland teach-in are hard at work, planning future teach-ins and building a coalition to fight staff layoffs and funding cuts in the Oakland School District. They are demanding that the state and federal government increase funding for education and other essential services and decrease military and prison budgets. Jonah Zern, a substitute teacher who helped organize the teach-ins and was later arrested at the San Francisco rally, says, "Our teach-ins showed students that education can be a liberatory process, that it could help students comprehend and challenge the problems that they face in their community. Many students in Oakland drop out or don't succeed because they intuitively understand that the education system is part of the system that is oppressing them. ... When students in Oakland see that education can be part of a process of building up their community and improving their conditions, they embrace it. The teach-ins did this for many students, and also reminded many of us teachers why we were in the classroom in the first place."

When asked about school districts where a teach-in like Oakland's might not fly, Zern says, "Simply opening students' minds to the fact that Iraqi people have families and lives just like ours, that Islam is a religion of peace, or that the media has its own agenda can truly be a transformative process for students anywhere."

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