“We’re not just talking about legislation. We’re talking about our daily lives. We need to be our own power. We need to be our own voice. We need to be our biggest advocates.” — Viridiana Martinez
We Are the Ones We’ve Been Waiting For

Activistas from the New Majority

By Christine Joy Ferrer

At the Empowering Women of Color conference in March this year, I was moved to hear Grace Lee Boggs, in an open dialogue with Angela Davis, say that we must re-imagine everything; change how we think, what we do, to re-invent our society and institutions in order for revolution to happen. And as I listened to female MC and rapper Rocky Rivera give short glimpses into the revolutionary lives of three iconic women activists—Gabriela Silang, Dolores Huerta, and Angela Davis—in the 16 bars of “Heart,” I wondered who would be our next movement builders.

According to a report from United for a Fair Economy—“State of the Dream 2012, the Emerging Majority”—by the year 2030, a majority of U.S. residents under 18 will be youth of color. By 2042, blacks, Latinos, Asians, Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, and other non-whites will collectively comprise a majority of the U.S. population. But numbers alone are not enough to shift the political and economic landscape if income and wealth remain overwhelmingly in the hands of a small group of whites. Although there have been many social and economic gains made for all races since the Civil Rights Movement, people of color continue to be left behind. The stark disparities that exist today in wealth, income, education, employment, poverty, incarceration, and health are the remnants of hundreds of years of racial oppression. To create a new world, we must sever the connection between race and poverty.

Excerpted here are the voices of young activistas who redefine what it means to be part of the new majority as women of color. They have chosen to confront the challenges plaguing their communities and build to eradicate institutionalized confines, while engaging in the struggle for social, economic and environmental justice. In their fight for liberation, they embody that famous quote from African American poet June Jordan: “We are the ones we have been waiting for.”

The Activistas

• Favianna Rodriguez (favianna.com) is a celebrated printmaker and digital artist based in Oakland, California. Her composites, created using high-contrast colors and vivid figures reflect literal and imaginative migration, global community, and interdependence.

• Smita Nadia Hussain is a poet, blogger and photographer who serves in leadership capacities for local young Democrat and API organizations, including Community Health for Asian Americans (CHAA), the English Center and the National Asian Pacific American Women’s Forum (NAPAWF). She recently traveled with Habitat for Humanity to build homes in Vietnam.

• Shanelle Matthews (sugarforyoursoul.com) does online media communications for Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice, advocating for women of color and families on the margins who have strategically been left out of the socio-political debate on reproductive health and rights.

• Rocky Rivera (rockyrivera.com) is a hip hop journalist by day and MC by night who found international acclaim by winning a Contributing Editor position on MTV’s docu-series, “I’m From Rolling Stone” (2007).

• Ya-Ting Liu is a federal advocate for the Tri-State Transportation Campaign and also the campaign manager for Rider Rebellion at Transportation Alternatives.

• Raquel Nunez is a youth organizer for Little Village Environmental Justice Organization.

Listen to more voices of activistas online and read their full stories at urbanhabitat.org/pe/radio
**Favianna Rodriguez:**
*Women of Color in the Movement*

As a young Latina I felt invisible. I am the daughter of immigrants and grew up in communities of color most of my life. I felt that my immigrant family, our communities were invisible. Yet, we all carried the brunt of what was happening to the economy in the country and even throughout the world. We were experiencing the effects of injustices in our own community. The injustices I saw as a child, the racism that I experienced via the media or the school curriculum, the xenophobia directed at my parents... angered me in a way that I didn’t have words for. Art became a way for me to talk about those experiences, reframe them, and do something positive. Making art was a way to have a voice and an empowering way to fight back, instead of acting out on my internalized oppression.

In my work, I approach issues that most affect me as a woman of color and that I see affecting the women around me, whether it’s my mother, family or friends. This includes issues around immigrant rights, economic justice, climate change, sexism, patriarchy, and globalization. I think about systems that work to oppress us and take away our agency to be the full humans we want to be. The same forces that are destroying the planet and organizing against workers and supporting the big banks as they rip off people all over the country are passing anti-immigrant laws and leading this conservative assault on women’s reproductive rights. I engage in campaigns that look at the intersections between these different struggles.

I’ve seen more women than ever before question and challenge the frameworks that we have accepted for so long. Women of color in particular are really challenging traditional feminism and thinking about how race is a key part of how we need to analyze being a woman. In the immigrant rights sector, I see women workers organizing for collectives that hold better resources and look at building infrastructures because many unions are not creating that space for immigrant labor—immigrant women in particular. I see women organizers usually outnumber men organizers and more young immigrant queer women are speaking out about their experiences. In the environmental sector, young women are drawing parallels between how we inflict abuse on mother Earth and on women’s bodies. Women are finally embracing their complexities and claiming their power.

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**Smita Nadia Hussain:**
*South Asian Freedom Fighters and Refugees*

My parents are from Bangladesh, a country birthed from genocide. People were victimized; tongues were cut off. They wanted independence and were literally fighting for their voice. They demanded the right to speak their language and fought for democracy. When the civil war happened in 1971, a lot of the guerilla fighters were women. Many were executed. Half a million women were raped in nine months. Yet, they still stood up.

When people think of Muslim women they think of an arranged marriage or a head covering. But, my grandmother’s sisters were doctors and lawyers in their country. They marched and protested for their rights. My great grandmother and her sisters used to march at their university saying they wanted a free country and that women should be free to go out and work.

There’s a lot of intersection between issues confronting Muslim women, South Asian immigrants and refugees, and Islamophobia in the United States. Their stories are those behind headlines of war, immigration and political strife.

I’m a part of the East Bay Refugee Forum—a coalition of organizations that work on issues facing API and refugee communities in the Bay Area. Directly and indirectly, these organizations provide necessary services and resources—such as, bus rider information, community events, legal and health clinics, and where to get vaccinations. I do some work also for the English Center, which serves immigrants, international students and professionals who need to improve their communication skills to achieve their goals, find better jobs, attend college, and improve their professional options.

Although there are services out there, with the budget cuts to social services across the country, so many benefits are lost to the point where fear of starvation and homelessness is very real. Within the refugee communities in Oakland, there is a high unemployment rate, much higher than the rest of the country and the rest of California. There’s one group called the Karan—a minority group from Burma that came here because of war in their country. They have an 80 percent unemployment rate; higher than any other constituency in Oakland. The economic situation of refugees in Oakland is very troubling. On top of the language issues, many don’t have a formal education and no English skills. They are stuck.
Raquel Nunez: Sustainability and the Environment

My passion for environmental justice is ever growing. By the age of 19, I was working to organize around various social justice issues. Over the last eight years, I have created several bodies of artwork with a central focus on social change and youth rights. My goal as an adult ally of the youth at Little Village Environmental Justice Organization (LVEJO) is to continue to grow and sustain an environmental justice youth leadership program. We organize youth by creating a curriculum that we share with high schools and have an open-door policy for anyone who would like to become involved and learn more.

LVEJO is currently focused on creating a sustainable sense of awareness with the volunteers and organization members. There is also a focus on creating more parks and garden spaces in the community, and a clear air campaign that is working on the site remediation of a retired coal-fired power plant. LVEJO partnered with the Chicago Clean Power coalition for the clean air campaign. This partnership was the catalyst for closing the two coal-fired power plants in the Chicago area.

Our current day institutions are crumbling but this has happened throughout history. The key is empowering people and opening spaces where they can learn the skills they need to thrive. Education, communication and new ideas go hand-in-hand. If we could change the way that we deal with one another and speak with one another, a natural evolution will happen through community dialogue. Self-knowledge is a critical component and revolution is the natural result of any community gaining self-knowledge on an individual basis.

With the current crisis intensifying the number of people experiencing poverty and food insecurity, community gardens and open space help people weather economic storms, inspire self-reliance and enhance health through increased access to whole foods, good nutrition and physical exercise. If we could change the way that we deal with one another and speak with one another, a natural evolution will happen through community dialogue. Self-knowledge is a critical component and revolution is the natural result of any community gaining self-knowledge on an individual basis.

It is important to increase funding for social services, open spaces and community gardens that build local food self-sufficiency and support fair access to fresh food. I believe, in order to improve community resiliency, we must strengthen local food and gardening knowledge through education in traditional foods, permaculture and sustainable agriculture techniques. It’s about providing our communities, youth and elders with business and leadership development training through gardening and food-based entrepreneurial opportunities.

Shanelle Matthews: Reproductive Health

The way women of color activate themselves in their communities is different from the way white women do it. All women of color are struggling in this country for access to resources, public assistance, equality. Black women are harmed by a lack of solidarity because we are often stigmatized as insatiable and hypersexual. The commodification of our bodies is something that is left out of the conversation.

The environmental impacts on black women’s bodies are ever present. From slavery to hurricane Katrina, we are the first to be displaced, denied resources and access to healthcare, denied opportunities to save our families. When you deny a woman an option to take care of herself, her reproductive rights, you are ensuring that she is going to withdraw from the workforce, thus increasing the capital for white men.

The foundational fabric of this country lies in racism and socio-economic status. It is almost safe to say that most black women are at the bottom of the socio-economic totem pole. To start working towards equality for all women, we must insert a racial and class analysis and build solidarity across color and gender lines. If we don’t acknowledge privilege in this country, we won’t be able to navigate through this conversation.

We have organizations working for the broader benefit of women that are leaving out low-income women and women of color. We must teach others about what we need, letting them know that it is our race that intersects with our class to deprive us of the things that they can easily access. We must educate those who are shifting policy for women that they need to include the intersection of race and class.

At Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice (ACRJ), our primary initiative is the 10-year-old Strong Families for changing the way people think, feel and act in support of families. We recognize that only 25 percent of families in America look like the hetero-normative, married-with-biological-children type that policy would have us believe. Seventy-five percent of us are queer, low-income, immigrant, refugee, families of color, and families with disabilities.

We are engineering a campaign, along with several other organizations, to shift policy so that it reflects the needs of families on the margins. We utilize the reproductive justice framework that says people should be able to empower themselves and their communities to make those socio-political decisions that are best for them and their families.
“Public transit is a vital service that connects people to opportunity that allows for social and economic mobility.”
—Ya-Ting Liu

Rocky Rivera:
Misogyny and Women Revolutionaries

As a pinay, female emcee and artist in the hip hop industry, I deal with misogyny so much. Every time I infiltrate this male circle, I must not fall into the “Here, let me show some skin and get your attention!” because that’s so easy to do. As a woman of color in the industry, you’re marginalized, hyper-sexualized, not allowed to “play” with the boys, and not treated as a peer. The young women who aren’t coming into it with a conscious mind, they’re just hoping to gain acceptance from the mostly male hip hop audience and most times, you’re treated as a novelty.

Hip hop was once underground, something that young blacks and Latinos in the Bronx created. They did what they had to do to make music. They were oppressed and rebelling. It was an empowering movement. Now 30 plus years later, it has become a commodity. But it all starts from the communities that have nothing... as a voice for the people. Once capitalism gets a hold of it, it ruins it. Capitalism took hold of the formula and squeezed all the creativity and originality out to package and market it—to white people. There is no depth to mainstream hip hop. Women are objectified, disrespected, and men are mere caricatures of themselves and stereotypes.

My rhyme is basically my world where every woman is respected and allowed to be a woman. She’s not limited, she has a voice, she’s strong, she’s vulnerable, she’s multidimensional. Rocky Rivera represents the woman that’s not compromising her values just to be in the entertainment industry.

My song “Heart,” speaks of Angela Davis, Gabriela Silang, and Dolores Huerta. Not a lot of people know who they are and they should be known alongside the Cesar Chavez, Malcolm Xs and Martin Luther Kings because they were fighting not only for Third World liberation and people of color but also for women. There was a double oppression that they had to overcome in order to be the organizers they were.

There aren’t a lot of women artists out there that speak of our history and our progress as a people. I knew that given the opportunity, I would definitely be speaking on behalf of all women, especially women of color. At the end of the day, if our male activists are injured or murdered, it’s our women revolutionaries who are still left fighting.

Ya-Ting Liu:
Transportation Justice

My family moved here from Taiwan when I was seven years old. We couldn’t afford a car. The bus was our only way to get around and we used it for everything. Public transit is a vital service that connects people to opportunity and allows for social and economic mobility. It’s just as important as education, health care and jobs. Rural, suburban communities also depend on transit and when bus service is cut, folks are literally stranded without any other way to get to work.

New York City boasts the largest and only 24-hour public transit system in the country. Its buses and subways carry 7.5 million daily riders who make up about one third of all mass transit users in the United States. Fares cover about 60 percent of bus and subway operating costs, so service continues to deteriorate due to lack of adequate investment from the state and the city.

Since 2007, New York transit riders have been fed a steady diet of fare hikes and service cuts due largely to the lack of leadership and political will of elected officials at the state level who control and determine how public transit is run and funded. The Rider Rebellion campaign was created in 2010 to organize transit riders to hold elected officials accountable for the quality of our transit service. We’re mobilizing outer borough communities disproportionately impacted by fare hikes and service cuts by partnering with community-based organizations and local elected officials. We’re also hitting the streets and surveying bus and subway riders directly about the quality of their commute and the improvements they’d like to see.

Nationally, we’re grappling with the legacy of auto-centric transportation planning and policies from the 1950s, when gas was 20 cents a gallon. Now we find ourselves in a very different world where we’re paying a very high price for oil dependency, which is also taking a toll on our climate. Transportation accounts for one-third of our country’s carbon footprint. Auto-centric planning has also led to neighborhoods without safe places to walk, bike and play.

If laws and policies were made purely on merit and based on measurable goals instead of politics, we would have a very different way of prioritizing government resources. If transportation investment decisions were made based on reducing congestion, fossil fuel dependency, job creation, and equitable access, transit projects would be a top priority every time.
More than 40 years after the struggles for free speech and ethnic studies at the University of California Berkeley and San Francisco State, students on the 23 campuses of the California State University (CSU) system are forging a new form for this generation’s protest movement.

Students for Quality Education (SQE) belongs to this new wave of organizations rising to protest cuts in the budget for higher education, increases in tuition, fees, and class sizes, reductions in available courses, and irresponsible salary increases for top administrators.

These new groups differ from previous student organizing in their commitment to creating alliances with the community, eschewing the traditional privilege and presumed vanguard status of the educated class, and redefining university students as workers subject to the dictates of contemporary neoliberalism.

SQE’s specific demands grow out of this reframing. The group focuses on the growing debt burden that working class students are shouldering as public education is privatized. Its members actively engage other workers and activists in dialogue to build community.

But even more important than SQE’s connection to the wider community is its inclusionary practice, rooted in its conscious understanding of racial, gender and sexual identity differences. In this it surpasses its predecessors (such as the Free Speech Movement, Students for a Democratic Society, SNCC, and the Third World Liberation Front) as well as its contemporary allies in Occupy, who remain at a stage of debating and theorizing the deconstruction of white male privilege.

Nyala Wright, SQE, California State University East Bay

“In my view, students are a definite part of the broader struggles of the 99% because we face the possibility of not being able to survive in an ever-growing economic downturn, despite getting an education. We carry some of the biggest debt in the country. This debt and its increase over time due to loans are directly related to increased tuition and fees. Both will squeeze out people of lower-income backgrounds and thereby prevent any real success.

The driving force behind the efforts to privatize public higher education is the rich few who want to marginalize and push out lower income people, who are predominantly people of color. Behind privatization is a system that puts money towards prisons that are filled up with a majority of African Americans and Latinos. Our country spends billions of dollars on Afghanistan, yet there is no similar amount of money put towards the education system. This continuing misallocation of funds to wars, prisons and other areas will lend itself to the collapse of our society and the people within it.

As far as Occupy is concerned, I would say that a more inclusive attitude is necessary in order to build community and actually have a more valuable effect on particular issues. I definitely feel that the Occupy movement needs to be more inclusive so others feel comfortable in taking part in making decisions and taking any actions thereafter.”
Given the CSU system’s long history of embracing diverse communities of working class students, it provides an ideal base for SQE, even as its commitment to its traditional population is in jeopardy.

SQE may reasonably claim varying degrees of credit for the California State Senate’s denial of reappointment to former CSU Trustee Herb Carter, limitations on executive salary increases, and State Assembly Speaker John Perez’ Middle Class Scholarship bill, which aims to substantially lower CSU and UC tuition and fees for students from families earning less than $150,000 per year.

Several state tax measures supported by SQE that will appear on the November 2012 ballot may also help to stem the tide of rising fees and shrinking services: the Molly Munger initiative, the Millionaires Tax, the Tax on Oil to Fund Education Initiative, and the California Income Tax for Multistate Businesses.

In the end, SQE may be judged by its effectiveness at limiting the ravages of privatization in state education—but its ideology and practice of radical inclusivity and 99% discourse will forever alter the future of university protest.

Nicholas L. Baham III is an associate professor of Ethnic Studies at California State University East Bay.
Youth are much smarter than adults tend to give them credit for, which is ironic since we were all youth once and know what being marginalized feels like. Youth know right away when something is unfair—they recognize it immediately but don’t always know what to do when they witness this unfairness. Or else, they’ve been socialized by adults to be complicit with the way things are.

At the Michigan Roundtable for Diversity & Inclusion’s Youth Program in Detroit, our issues change each year with each new group of youth that join our program. One of our program principles is that youth should organize on the issues that they’re passionate about; that they are directly affected by. In our program, our youth decide on the issues they want to focus on as they are living those experiences. Last year, the group focused on disability justice, structural racism, strengthening alliance with LGBT communities, and immigration. This year’s group is focusing on Islamaphobia, educational justice, sexual assault against teen girls, and organizing youth to be better connected across the city.

It’s necessary to provide youth with a structure and training for skills to help them be successful in proposing/implementing solutions to these challenges. Their access to opportunity and resources is so intertwined into intuitions of social, racial and class inequalities. Some youth are over-intellectualizing, which detaches them from what’s happening to everyday people. How could they ever connect with one another, especially young people in low-income neighborhoods where that intellectual language and mindset is not in their everyday vernacular. If we can help them understand our complex systems by meeting them where they’re at, they can create equitable solutions.

It’s also important to help them understand the history of where they live. With Detroit’s history of racist FHA policies, the intentional segregation of racial/ethnic communities by one of the automotive companies, racial rebellions, and a myriad of other things, history informs us of where and why we are in the neighborhoods we are today. We use intergenerational oral histories to help young people learn about what our region was like “back in the day” and hear that history from the perspective of people who look like them.

Youth should learn the history of their communities from their own community members. Ethnic Studies is the reason why I’m an organizer today. When I finally learned about the oppression faced by API communities in the U.S., I had an “A-ha, this shit is fucked up” moment. It was truly an awakening for me that opened my eyes to the ways in which my K-12 public school education had brainwashed me into believing—that the U.S. was this amazing country founded on the principles of freedom, liberty and justice. And yet, we have a horrific history of devaluing and dehumanizing people of color, women, non-Christians, queer communities, and the disabled. I learned about amazing API women who were standing up and speaking out for justice, I learned about exclusionary policies, Japanese Internment, and Vincent Chin, whose murder happened right here in Detroit.

If we don’t offer ethnic studies, we only maintain the dominant narrative of whiteness (and other privilege) in this country. We have to challenge that narrative as often as we can to dismantle oppressive behaviors and mindsets. When a safe space is created, as in a diversity workshop or an ethnic studies class setting, we can begin to probe, challenge and devise new ways of connecting to one another.

Theresa Q. Tran is a youth program specialist at the Michigan Roundtable for Diversity and Inclusion. She received her M.A. in Social Work at the University of Michigan where she studied community organizing with youth and families. Tran also serves on the board of Asian & Pacific Islander American Vote—Michigan, working to increase civic engagement of APIAs.
Privatizing Public Education:
The Neoliberal Model

By Lois Weiner

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was passed with bipartisan support during the Bush presidency and despite many attempts to repeal it, it’s still the law of the land. Its rhetorical promise, like the Obama administration’s “Race to the Top” program, is that the federal government will hold public schools accountable for their failure to educate poor and working class Hispanic and African American students. But the purported aim of increasing educational opportunity masks the real intent of these so-called education reformers to create a privatized system of public education that has a narrow, vocational curriculum enforced through standardized tests.

The “reform” rhetoric is enormously seductive to parents and low-income communities whose children attend poorly funded, poorly functioning schools. In predominantly Hispanic and African American neighborhoods, schools are often incapable of providing children with more than the rudiments of literacy because they cannot afford to recruit and retain sufficient numbers of teachers. Schools that serve large concentrations of recent immigrants are usually so underfunded and overwhelmed by the number of students that they are compelled to use bathrooms and closets as classrooms.

Education “reforms” like NCLB and Race to the Top, however, presume that if children do not succeed at school, the responsibility rests solely with the school. Such an approach destroys the structure and organization of a publicly-funded and presumably publicly-controlled system of education begun more than a century ago. In fact, NCLB closely resembles the blueprint developed in ultra right-wing think tanks for replacing locally controlled, state-funded school systems with a collection of privatized services governed by the market. What NCLB chiefly adds to the original “free market” framework is standardized curricula and testing and the Christian Right’s “faith-based” interventions.

Applying the Skewed Logic of Free Markets to Schools

The free market underpinning to education pretends that schools can compensate for the array of savage economic and social problems created or abetted by government policies. Under such flawed reasoning, public funding for low-cost housing is reduced or eliminated because the “market” is best at regulating housing costs and availability. However, when markets fail, resulting in soaring rates of homelessness, schools are told that it is not an acceptable excuse for a child’s poor performance. If there is sufficient political furor over the schools’ inability to cope with this crisis, the government creates a discrete token allocation for educational services for the homeless. But the allocation often is too small relative to the enormity of the problem to be meaningful. Just tracking the whereabouts of children who move from one shelter to another, let alone providing them with appropriate services, is beyond the capacity of most urban school systems, which would have to interact with numerous bureaucratic, under-resourced and dysfunctional agencies in the process.

A program to advance educational opportunity has to be undertaken as part of a larger project to end inequality, including de facto school segregation. To argue that schools have a limited capacity to ameliorate economic and social inequality is not to diminish the moral or political importance of the struggle to improve education. Any progressive movement deserving of the name will demand that public schools provide all students with an education that will allow them to be well-rounded, productive citizens, capable of competing for well-paying jobs. Improving schools for the poor and working class can make a difference in the lives of some children and
for that reason alone, progressive school reform deserves our attention. Improving schools for all children is of critical political significance because it demands that American democracy make good on its pledge of equality. However, we also need to be cognizant of the limitations of school reform as a policy vehicle for making society more equitable. As the authors\(^1\) of *Choosing Equality: The Case for Democratic Schooling* note, education can challenge the tyranny of the labor market—but cannot eliminate it. As neoliberal policies tighten their grip on governments and capitalism’s assault on the living conditions of working people intensifies, schooling becomes an ever weakening lever for improving the economic well-being of individuals even as it remains a critical arena for political struggle.

Any agenda for progressive social change, which includes improving education, must address what historian David Hogan calls “the silent compulsion of economic relations,” i.e. the nexus of racial segregation in schools and housing and the funding of schools with local property taxes. Segregation in housing has become the pretext for abandoning the challenge of racially integrating schools, which in turn has seriously weakened the forces that can challenge funding inequities. Some African American activists and researchers advocate dropping the demand for integrating schools, arguing that African American children would be better served in segregated schools staffed by African American teachers. Although the despair that underlies such thinking is understandable,\(^2\) the reality is that racially segregated schools and school systems are more isolated politically and, thus, more vulnerable in funding battles with state legislatures. The urgency for making schools better is undeniable, but so is the necessity for mounting a political and legal challenge to de facto school segregation and the use of local property taxes to fund schools.

**NCLB and Capital’s Global Agenda for Education**

The endurance of NCLB is a dismal indication of the level of disorientation about education’s role in a democracy and the contradiction of privatizing this essential civic function.

Underlying the bipartisan endorsement of “school reform” is a shared ideological support for a neoliberal global capitalist economy and neoliberal view of education. In both industrialized and developing nations, neoliberal reforms are promoted as rationalizing and equalizing delivery of social services. Even the World Bank demands curricular and structural changes in education when it provides loans as outlined in its draft “World Development Report 2004: Making Services Work for Poor People,” which describes education’s purpose solely in terms of preparing workers for jobs in a global economy where capitalism can move jobs wherever it wishes—that is, to countries where profits trump working conditions and salaries. The draft was later modified in negotiations with governments and non-governmental organizations, but the original is a declaration of war, especially on public education and independent teachers unions.

Public education remains the largest piece of public expenditure, highly unionized and not yet privatized. The draft report identifies unions, especially teachers unions, as one of the greatest threats to global prosperity, arguing that they have “captured governments,” holding poor people hostage to demands for more pay and suggests that teachers should be fired wholesale when they strike or resist demands for reduced pay. The report also calls for privatizing services, greatly reducing public funding, devolving control of schools to neighborhoods, and increasing user fees. The World Bank has implemented many elements of the draft report by making loans and aid contingent upon “restructuring,” which is to say, destroying public funding and control of educational systems. The results, writes University of Buenos Aires Professor Adriana Puiggros, have been devastating to literacy rates and the Bank’s promise of equality.\(^3\)

A key element of the program is limiting access to higher education through the imposition of higher tuition and reduced government support to institutions and individual students. Meanwhile, lower education is charged only with preparing students for jobs requiring basic skills, which the multinationals aim to move from one country to another. Schools that train workers for jobs requiring limited literacy is all we can realistically expect for poor people in poor countries, says the report, and they do not require well-educated or skilled teachers. Teachers with significant education are a liability because they are costly to employ and the largest expense of any school system, the report argues, whereas minimally educated workers require only teachers who are themselves minimally educated.

Most of NCLB’s elements for reorganizing education in the U.S. are straight out of the World Bank draft report: Charter schools and vouchers to be used in private schools fragment oversight and control; testing require-
ments and increasingly punitive measures for low scores pressure schools to limit what is taught so that the tests become the curriculum; privatization of school services, such as tutoring and professional development for teachers tied to raising test scores, undercuts union influence and membership.

Teachers Unions Fight Neoliberal Downscaling

The Bush administration was quite open about the explicit linkage between a deskilled teaching force and a narrow curriculum as evidenced by the statements of Grover Whitehurst, an undersecretary in the Department of Education agency responsible for education research. Public investment in research about teacher education is unnecessary, he maintained, because the government is required to provide only a basic education that will prepare students for entry-level jobs; therefore, government funds are better spent creating materials for teaching basic skills that teachers with little or no expertise can use. This is precisely the strategy promoted in the draft report, which lauds programs that briefly train 15 year old peasant girls, who then teach literacy skills in rural areas.

One way to limit access is to charge fees to attend school at all levels. We see the former strategy in underdeveloped countries, where families must often pay for schooling that was once available for free. In fact, a World Bank condition for loans explicitly prohibited free education until a movement by liberals in the U.S. Congress, informed and inspired by global justice activists, challenged it.

Access to learning is also limited by curriculum. Larry Kuehn, research director of the British Columbia Teachers Federation, has traced this trend to the Reagan administration, circa 1987, when the U.S. began promoting the development of “education indicators” to guide curricula and testing at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The OECD consists of the 29 most industrialized countries and some rapidly industrializing ones, such as Korea and Mexico. In the early discussions, the OECD planned the development of uniform curricula with “culture-free” materials appropriate for the new “information economy.” Kuehn’s work illuminates not only the anti-intellectual and anti-humanistic assumptions of these curricula, but also how existing expectations about what students should learn had to be “downscaled.”

Teachers in the Global North have avoided the full force of neoliberalism’s assault on education for decades. It is only in the past few years that they have started to realize that their profession and the ideals that brought them into classrooms may be destroyed. Many are frightened, but they are also angry. Growing numbers realize that teachers and their unions have to reach out to communities and parents, forming mutually respectful alliances. And now discussions about the global context now seem relevant.

The universal experience of privatization, increasing tuition, enormous student debt, and ever less support for public education has awakened the unions. Yet, missing still in the work of teacher unions, their leaders and ranks, is an understanding that to defend public education in this country, teachers and their unions must help develop an international response to neoliberalism—one that puts justice and equity at the forefront of the union’s program for education and develops alliances across national borders.

Endnotes

2. African American and Hispanic youth are frequently tracked into classes that offer low-level materials and poor instruction rather than college preparatory work, even in well funded school districts.
3. <indymedia.org.uk/en/regions/cambridge/2004/02/286118.html>
Occupying the Future, Starting at the Roots

By Diana Pei Wu

On Earth Day—April 22, 2012—about 200 people, accompanied by children in strollers, dogs, rabbits, and chickens, and carrying hundreds of pounds of compost and at least 10,000 seedlings, entered a 14-acre piece of land containing the last Class I agricultural soil in the East Bay. Located on the Albany-Berkeley border in the Bay Area, the plot is owned by the University of California Berkeley. By the end of the day, they had weeded, tilled and successfully cultivated about an acre of the land. By May 14, when 100 University of California riot police surrounded the tract and began arresting the farmers, Occupy the Farm had cultivated around five acres of the plot known as the Gill Tract.

The Occupy farmers have laid out footpaths around cultivated plots, created wildlife corridors, riparian zones, protected areas for native grasses and a wild turkey nest, and set up a library and a kitchen. They have planted thousands of seedlings of corn, tomatoes, squash, beans, broccoli, herbs, and strawberries, including heirloom varieties from a local seed bank. Other plots have been reserved for agro-ecological research. There’s also a permaculture garden for kids on the other side of a gazebo of woven branches where wind chimes tinkle in the breeze.

Gopal Dayaneni of Movement Generation says that the vision for the farm is the “practice and promotion of sustainable urban agriculture with a commitment to food justice and food sovereignty.” He is a father, activist and member of what he calls the “new urban peasantry.” Food grown on the farm will be distributed—for free—through existing food justice networks in the San Francisco Bay Area.

On April 24, the University shut off the water supply and threatened the farmers with eviction. University administration has gone on a media offensive, attempting to pit researchers against the Occupy farmers and according to some reports, preventing them from negotiating with the farmers. Some faculty members have published statements in support of the farmers, arguing that the goals of the farm are aligned with the public policy goals of the state and the U.C. mission. If transforming a student’s life is part of that mission, U.C. Berkeley student Lesley Haddock has certainly experienced it working on the farm. “Before our project began, I had never planted a seed,” she admits. “But in the past two weeks, I have become a farmer!”

Public Good—Private Gain at the Gill Tract

One of the Occupy farmers, Ashoka Finley, is a program assistant with Urban Tilth and runs an organic farm in collaboration with students at Richmond High School, in Richmond, California. A political economy graduate of U.C. Berkeley, Finley believes that the farm is redefining and reclaiming the role of the public university, just as the Occupy movement is redefining and reclaiming public space.

“The history of the Gill Tract is [about] public subsidization of private research that [profits] the corporate industrial complex; not research for the public good,” he says.

It was not always this way. The 104-acre plot was sold to the University in 1928 by the Gill family with the condition that it be used as an agricultural research station. Under the Smith-Lever Act of 1914, part of the University’s mission as a land grant institution is to promote community involvement and initiatives in agriculture.

From the 1940s through the 1990s, research con-
ducted at the Gill Tract laid the groundwork for successful, non-chemical and non-petroleum-based methods for controlling numerous major insect pests on several California crops, and for the integration of biological, chemical and cultural methods of pest control. The innovative methods developed, shared and refined at the International Center for Biological Control included intercropping and using bugs to control pests in addition to or in place of pesticides, and means to reduce overall chemical dependency and prevent the development of superbugs in industrial and community agriculture worldwide.

The turning point came in 1998, when Novartis gave $25 million to the Plant and Microbial Biology department to conduct genetic research on the land. “They kicked off the local organic pest management project to do gene research,” says Ulan McKnight of the Albany Farm Alliance. “What was here before directly benefitted the people of California; now what they do here directly benefits biotechnology companies. Instead of doing things that can help people, they are doing things that benefit the one percent.”

Among the projects closed down at the time was a seed bank of rare heirloom varieties of many important food crops, and a state-of-the-art drip irrigation system from a student-run urban sustainable agriculture demonstration plot. Until the water was cut off at the Tract, the Occupy farmers were planning to start using those irrigation tubes again.

**Privatization Leaves U.C. System Impoverished**

The trend of privatizing the research and knowledge produced at public institutions is systemic, according to Julie Sze, associate professor of American Cultures at U.C. Davis. A long-time supporter of social justice and student movements, Sze attributes her activism to her student days at U.C. Berkeley, where she took courses with the likes of **RP&E** founder Carl Anthony. She credits the university with being the “social justice innovation lab” that produced so many of the environmental justice leaders of today and argues that corporatization is an impoverishment of the U.C. system and a betrayal of the system’s legacy for California.

It is worth noting that the number of people graduating from UCLA annually exceeds the total number of people graduating from all private colleges in the

“I was nervous about taking my daughters into a land occupation. But I also feel an enormous responsibility to stand up against a global economic system that puts profit over people.”

— Michelle Mascarenhas-Swan
state. It is no exaggeration, therefore, to say that whatever happens with the U.C. system affects the future of California.

Universities have a special role to encourage ways of thinking that go beyond the corporate workplace, says Sze. People who have fought to work with communities on the side of racial and economic justice are an important legacy of the university. People like Paul Taylor, who in the 1930s, promoted the idea of the agricultural job ladder (where farm workers could eventually become family farmers) over the agribusiness model, which depended on seasonal workers. The university is a place to explore and imagine different possibilities and different futures, which is why student activism is a global force and so deeply threatening to the existing order.

Sze believes that the move towards corporate funding of research, coupled with increasing student debt, has curtailed the ability and desire of students to participate in the creative and innovative social justice thinking and activity that is so important to the common good.

David Naguib Pellow, another movement scholar-activist and a professor of sociology at the University of Minnesota, observes, “Every [public] university I’ve worked at, professors are encouraged to secure external funding for their research to alleviate state budget constraints. This often involves seeking resources from corporations and foundations that have little or no accountability to the public, which amounts to the privatization of ideas, knowledge and the commons, and is a dangerous trend if we desire to live in a democratic society.”

The tuition hikes and the cuts in programs that do not have a corporate/profit bent are a direct result of the bias towards education in the service of corporations, according to Finley, and needs to be countered by the training of people in the service of people.

Occupy the Future—Take It, Make It, Shape It

In an email sent out in early May, Adbusters urges recipients to “occupy the future;” that is, “to describe, build and sustain the post-capitalist future we want to live in.”

Dayaneni concurs with that sentiment. “People ask me what they can do to support. I say, take more land. Occupy a library, a clinic, whatever, plan it right and [re-launch] it appropriately and at scale. We need to prove that we have the ability to self govern. This is the new moment of occupy, not tit for tat, not cat-and-mouse games with cops, but full-scale intervention. Occupy the Farm is one of the first to-scale interventions.”

Projects like Occupy the Farm also create a sort of sovereignty and allow a space for larger political expression where people can articulate their demand for a more egalitarian, just society through work done with their own hands, argues Finley.

“In the first world, we have been fed a false sense of security that is imploding,” says Michelle Mas-
carenhas-Swan, recounting her family’s experience with the militant experiment in collective governance and self-sufficiency. “On Earth Day, our families were a part of manifesting a collective vision for a better way forward—that the land be a community educational center. We have planted strawberries in the children’s garden and feed the chickens with snails that we collect from our own garden. My partner, a cook, brings us food regularly. We are making that vision real.”

Not everybody, however, sees Occupy the Farm in the same light and on the same terms, Finley points out. For many communities of color, farmwork is both a practice of material and cultural survival and self-sufficiency, and at the same time, deeply tied to racialized exploitation in the United States. For African Americans, farming is related to slavery and sharecropping. For recent immigrants from Latin America, farming is about the bankruptcy brought on by the dumping of subsidized monoculture products in their countries. And for Southeast Asian immigrants, farming is associated with a bloody countryside strewn with unexploded ordnance and other detritus from U.S. wars. At the same time, like other forced immigrants before them, these people have also brought with them a knowledge and identity that is wrapped up in the cultivation and ceremony of working the land.

Subsistence through the production of one’s own food is one of the most effective forms of resistance. But the action at Gill Tract also points toward the broader challenges at the University.

The arena of struggle revealed by Occupy the Farm is not just organic farming, food justice, and food sovereignty. The classrooms, the libraries, and the research agenda of the university are being shaped to meet the needs of corporate sponsors. Ground-breaking areas in scholarship that were pioneered at the University of California, such as Ethnic Studies, Women and Gender Studies, Peace and Conflict Studies, were won by student-led protest and strikes (and occupations) in the early 1970s. They now face devastating cuts, against which students are mobilizing. Battles against tuition hikes, student debt, and democratizing University governance will be key to shifting the overall direction of the University and the society.

Amilcar Cabral, the African revolutionary and agricultural engineer once said: “Culture contains the seed of resistance, which blossoms into the flower of liberation.” At the Gill Tract we can see seeds of resistance that have been planted—but it is clear that in order to blossom, they will need watering.

Endnotes
1. <daily.cal.org/2012/05/02/gill-tract-occupation-impedes-agricultural-research/>,
   <daily.cal.org/2012/05/02/gill-tract-occupiers-sustainability-ideas-are-wrong-headed/>
3. <daily.cal.org/2012/05/01/gill-tract-occupations-mission-mirrors-state-public-policy-goals/>
4. <daily.cal.org/2012/05/06/occupation-is-gill-tracts-last-chance/>
5. <mindfully.org/Farm/2003/Altieri-Gill-Tract28oct03.htm#1>
6. The practice of planting two or more crops together or in close proximity. Benefits include structural support for climbing plants (beans and squash growing on corn), increased yields (from legumes enriching soils), natural pest repellents (marigolds, for example), and climate control for shade loving plants (coffee grown under shade-producing trees, such as Erythrina or Jacaranda).
From the Camps to the Neighborhoods

A Conversation with Movement Generation

Interview by Ellen Choy

The transformation of the Occupy moment into power for movements that can actually challenge entrenched economic interests will be a complex process. Movement Generation activists recently gathered to reflect on what it will take to make this happen. For the full interview visit urbanhabitat.org/rpe/radio

Ellen Choy: Why are you committed to the Occupy movement?

Michelle Mascarenhas-Swan: We think Occupy’s critical because we believe that mass movements are a vital ingredient to shifting the public debate and moving us closer to transforming the economy and the political system. This is not just about making demands on the state, but also about reclaiming our right to meet our own needs directly, in community—to restore our resilience, our ability to support one another, to look after each other, to have the means to do that collectively. I think Occupy is presenting a really important model for how people can work together to set priorities and make decisions about how to best meet each others’ needs in a way that’s responsive and responsible to the place where they live.

Carla Perez: Movement Generation is trying to flesh out and articulate a concept around an organizing model. This model organizes people around the direct decision-making process and physical work in meeting a need at hand. Whether it’s needing to grow our own food because of the discriminatory land-use processes that haven’t allowed for fresh produce in our neighborhood (at least, not without highly gentrifying our historically black, Latino, working class, diverse community); or putting people back in their homes by repairing them and making them accessible; or building our own schools. And doing it in a way that forces a right-to-govern question. You know there’s some legal or other kind of barrier that you’re going to hit up against. They’re going to say, “You can’t use tax money to do that!” Or, “You’re exceeding the amount of food that’s permissible on a lot of this size in an area that’s zoned in this way!” That gives us the opportunity to say, “Who are you to say that we can’t do this when you have made political decisions that take these essential resources out of our community?”

Resilience-based organizing. That’s what Occupy is doing, too. It’s learning how to self-govern and self-manage and bring people together to get directly involved in that process at multiple levels.

Gopal Dayaneni: We don’t think that a movement is going to emerge solely out of the long, hard slogging organizing of 501(c)3 organizations. It’s going to need those sparks and those pushes of mass momentum. All of those things need to be in relationship to each other. And we do not have time to miss opportunities. It is okay for us to jump onto an opportunity like Occupy to try and create a psychic break with the system, to spark a shift away from the dominant culture. It’s okay for us to try that and to be unsuccessful. But it’s not okay for us to miss the boat. Because for us to be committed to the long haul, something has to change very soon, or the long haul will not be pleasant. Communities in Oakland will have a much harder fight if things don’t change really quickly, very soon. It’s going to be a
hard road regardless, but we have the opportunity to set up transformations in our relationships to each other that will make it better. That, for us, is another reason why the movement can’t be missed.

**Choy:** The reclamation of land and housing has become a pinnacle battleground for Occupy. Interestingly enough, this directly overlaps with Movement Generation’s commitment to a strategy where land reclamation is central. How did land and housing become an Occupy fight? And why is this critical?

**Mascarenhas-Swan:** One is the obvious plight of many of our families after this [real estate] bubble burst. The financial sector had duped a lot of families of color and working class people into deep debt based on this bubble and then ended up putting folks out on the street—foreclosing on family homes. That’s obviously one way the land reclamation [issue] has come to bear. People recognize that housing and access to land is a basic human right. No one should be out on the street at any time. People need shelter; and not only shelter, but a stable and safe place to call home. When so many millions have had their families impacted by this foreclosure crisis—it’s a clear call to reclaim what we believe is a basic right.

**Dayaneni:** This idea that we need to fundamentally change the tenure relationship to land and housing in this country, to take soil out of the market, to restore the commons—all of these ideas share a common history. What’s interesting for us right now is that there is an opportunity to take the tactic of claiming space and connecting it with real political projects that can transform people’s relationship to place. One of the ways that we think about the ongoing and ever-escalating food crisis in the City of Oakland is: “What huge plots of land can we take to do urban agriculture?” That’s important, but from our perspective, it’s almost more important to have small lots that half-a-dozen or dozen families around a neighborhood can share control of and grow food on, together. Not because it will meet all of their needs, but because it changes their relationship to the community, to the place. That’s where the transformative work happens.

The idea of people actually laboring in their own interests, as a form of organizing, is what’s transformative, instead of door-knocking to convince people that they should work together to take a plot of land where they can have a community garden. The idea of the action as an organizing opportunity in and of itself that the people model, join in, and can have control of—that’s what ultimately butts up against the rules. The rules of the city or the rules of the developer. And as we all know, the rules are made by the rulers. Until we are the rulers, the rules don’t serve us, they serve the rulers. So, the idea of us actually doing the work and using the actions to organize people is an exciting possibility.

**Mateo Nube:** The part that connects to Movement Generation’s interpretation of both our societal crisis and the solution to it, is that our profit-based, pollution-based economy sees land as a commodity. The next step to seeing land as a commodity is to disrespect land and disrespect everything that depends on that land—all species and ecosystems. That’s a mismanagement of [our] home. Many members of our species have forgotten what it means to take good care of our home and take good care of each other. So then, land reclamation becomes an expression of: “We, the people who live in this neighborhood,” or “We, who’ve been here for a long time, are the best keepers of this place.” We need to re-learn what being keepers of a place is and to have ownership over that keeping.

Land reclamation, I think, is a really logical, healthy, proactive, generative way of calling the question: Will big corporations and capitalists determine how we manage where we live? Or will those of us who live here, or who deserve to live here, or have historically lived here, be the ones to manage that space and make the decisions.

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*Michelle Mascarenhas-Swan, Carla Perez, Mateo Nube, and Ellen Choy are members of Movement Generation. Ellen Choy is also a producer on KPFK radio’s Apex Express.*
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