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tasks the next years

Build a Left Pole in Oppressed Nationality Movements



Fight White Privilege



Organize the Poorer Layers of the Working Class



Denounce Capitalism and Bash the Rich

Student Environmentalists Learn Hard Lessons

by Johnn Tan and Eric Odell

Complex divisions around issues of nationality nearly capsized SEAC, the nation's largest student group.

Pretend it's 30 years from now, the revolution has happened, and you're watching People's Jeopardy. One of the contestants chooses the category "Social Movements of the 20th Century" for 200 Labor Credits. The following question comes up: "This very large student organization radicalized thousands of young, predominantly white activists. Amid internal struggles and confusion about its role, it fragmented and disappeared with stunning speed from the political scene."

For those who are up on their history or who were around back in the 1960s, the response is clear: "What is Students for a Democratic Society?" But over the last year the possibility developed of another response: "What is the Student Environmental Action Coalition?"

SEAC (pronounced "seek") is a national network of college- and high school-based environmental groups. It was founded in 1988 and developed into an organization with a core of hundreds of chapters and a periphery probably in the thousands. Since early on, SEAC has functioned in a fairly mass-democratic fashion; students from SEAC chapters all over the country come together to make decisions and direct the organization. In this regard, SEAC is uncommon for an

organization of its size: there is no one on the outside running the show. A student organization like SEAC comes around maybe once in a generation.

SEAC's initial environmental focus expanded over time as its leading core developed a sharper critique of the system, and particularly of racism. As a result, it has played a historic role in radicalizing thousands of student activists and infusing them with a strong commitment against racism and white privilege. In doing so, it has, unsurprisingly, made plenty of mistakes. Most of them have been manageable, but over the last year some classic errors around nationality and white privilege have emerged that threaten the very survival of the organization.

Environmental Justice at the Base

People of color and poor communities have adopted the term "environmental justice" to highlight the disproportionate impact of the environmental crisis on their lives.

SEAC's national leadership has embraced this orientation, and promoted it in training programs and other concrete assistance to the base. As a result, SEAC activists have played key roles in a number of prominent

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environmental justice struggles.

- Hydro Quebec's massive James Bay Project, which would flood thousands of square miles of land, cause irreparable environmental damage, and displace thousands of Cree and Inuit
- The University of Arizona's plans to build a large telescope complex on Mount Graham, which is both a last habitat of the endangered red squirrel and a sacred site of the San Carlos Apache
- The toxic pollution in Chester, Pennsylvania, which has the highest per capita number of incinerators in the country and a population that is 65 percent African American

Struggle over SEAC's Direction

SEAC's grassroots work around environmental justice has been very good. But over the last year a power struggle emerged, largely because the national body failed to provide focused leadership and gradually became disconnected from activists at the base. Questions arose about SEAC's structure and composition, in particular, the relationship between white students and the People of Color Caucus.

This struggle developed both within the national leadership as a whole and within the People of Color Caucus itself. People in national leadership were sharply divided, and the POCC was split down the middle. The crisis paralyzed SEAC, and as a result, it lost much of its foundation funding, the national staff either resigned or were laid off, the National Office closed, and half the leadership of the POCC left the organization.

Two opposing political lines have emerged.

According to one view, SEAC is an organization based in both the environmental movement and the student movement; it is predominantly, but by no means exclusively, white. The national organization has a twofold responsibility toward its members. On the one hand, it must serve the needs of its base—that is, it must remain in touch with the original ideals that led people to join SEAC in the first place. At the same time, it has an obligation to lead its base forward to a broader political perspective and social practice, one that is oriented toward

environmental justice. As such, SEAC plays a developmental role—people come in wanting to save the trees and leave with much more. People of color have an essential role to play and should have significant organizational resources at their disposal: money, staff time, set-aside political representation. The organization as a whole should take active measures to counteract underrepresentation and patterns of white chauvinism and white privilege.

According to the opposing view, SEAC, like any organization that is based mainly among white students, is inherently privileged and thus racist. The only way SEAC can play a useful and progressive role is to qualitatively transform itself—from a student-based organization to a community-based organization that is located primarily in communities of color.

The authors of this article feel that the second position is "ultraleft." It fails to consider four important points.



A logo from SEAC's 1990 conference which drew 7,600 people. The SEAC POCC was founded at this event.

1. The majority of college students are from middle-class backgrounds. Nevertheless, building the student movement, including its predominantly white section, is important for its own sake. Students have objective interests in direct opposition to the system in general and the schools in particular. These interests are the basis for students organizing around a progressive agenda based in significant part on issues that impact them directly.

2. It is important to build organizations in constituencies that have a "contradictory class location" (like students) as allies of the working class and oppressed nationality movements. If we are to defeat the forces arrayed against us, we will need a united front of all the sectors of society who aren't at the top of the heap.

3. Historically, students have played a catalytic role in the emergence and development of popular movements—both here and in countries around the world. At certain points students have even played something of a "vanguard" role, leading the movement forward in a new direction. (The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee played such a role in its early years.)

4. There is a certain hypocrisy in white people declaring that an organization that brought them

Lessons for SEACers (and Others)

- As you move ahead in your understanding, don't "slam the door" behind you. Always maintain a place in the organization for new people and those with a less radical vision. Remember, tomorrow's leaders come from today's newbies. If those who are politically developed go off in their own direction and leave the rest behind to struggle on their own, that's as good as pushing the self-destruct button for the organization.
- When white activists take up an issue that is impacting a community of color, you should do so because it's the right thing to do, not because it's a way to "diversify" or gain credentials with people of color.
- White people must move cautiously in developing relationships with oppressed communities, neither barging in with your own agenda nor assuming you have the right to proclaim who is the vanguard of that community.
- Predominantly white groups should make a dedicated effort to broaden their culture and reach out to underrepresented groups. But when people of color decide to work in their own formations, accept it and give support. Build principled alliances.
- Within a predominantly white organization, people of color will almost invariably need to get together. You can and should make demands on the larger group for resources, political representation, and so forth. But make sure that, as an organized entity, you yourselves represent the breadth of perspectives of people of color within the organization, and not just those of one subgroup or faction.
- Practical unity between predominantly white student groups and groups based in communities of color may not be feasible at a given time. But new possibilities for alliances are most likely to open up in the course of building broad militant struggles.
- Finally, while pursuing "environmental justice" issues, student activists should never lose sight of "traditional" environmental issues such as global warming and biodiversity, which bear on the survival of our planet and our very species and will only be solved through mass struggle and social change.

—E.O. & J.T.

into activism in the first place can't really do valid or important work in the sector they came from. By saying so, they set themselves up as the exception—"Good White People" whose deep antiracist understanding somehow exempts them from the task of bringing other whites through the radicalization process.

Getting Back on Track

People in the leadership have begun to see at least some of the problems with the ultraleft line.

- It would mean abandoning SEAC's original base and shutting SEAC off from the source of activists who will lead it tomorrow.
- It plays on the guilt of white people for being who they are—white and mostly middle-class—instead of helping them understand how to deal

with the reality of their identity in an honest fashion.

- It is a position based in racial liberalism—treating people of color not as individuals but as idealized embodiments of their nationality.

This kind of line often leads to white people tailing behind people of color unquestioningly, ignoring real differences in the experiences of various oppressed communities, and not considering that people of color in the group may themselves hold very diverse views.

Will SEAC recover its former size, spirit, and level of organization? It is still too early to tell. Given its dynamic history, though, there is reason for optimism—if it can leave the worst of these political errors behind and get back to the business of building a student movement fighting against environmental devastation and human oppression. □