

On the Question of the Term "Privilege" to Conditions of Latina/o, Black, Native American, Undocumented, Other Underrepresented Minority Students, and All Poor and Working Class Students, and Our Rights and Responsibilities at Elite Campuses Like UC Berkeley and UCLA

The following 3 statements have been submitted to list serves associated with the many groups and people who are organizing for the March 4 Day of Action to Defend Public Education. They are part of what has been an ongoing topic of concern and debate: what it means to be a Latina/o, black, Native American, undocumented, or working-class or poor student at elite campuses like Berkeley, what that means for our relationships to the communities that we came from and are trying to reach out to, and what our rights and responsibilities are on these elite campuses. We encourage anyone who wants to add to this debate to contact BAMN and letters@bamn.com and we will forward it and post it on other list serves.

From BAMN (The Coalition to Defend Affirmative Action, Integration, and Immigrant Rights and Fight for Equality By Any Means Necessary)

February 1, 2010

We want to make a contribution to the discussion on the privileged position of UCB students, including the relevance of the term "privileged" to the conditions on campus for Latina/o, black, Native American, undocumented students and other under-represented minority students, as well as for all poor and working-class students. We also want to address the rights and responsibilities of under-represented minority students at elite universities.

To us the relevant starting point is the question of social power--what it is and how we wield it. Despite our pitifully small numbers in the UC system, Latina/o and black students have been disproportionately in the lead of the new student movement. This is in part because we are the most experienced leaders and because we have the most to fight for. The struggles for affirmative action, against school closures and most importantly, for immigrant rights, have prepared us to lead this historic struggle to defend public education.

But our prominence and power in the new movement also derives from the objective strength of our communities and our opponents' recognition of that fact. Yudof, Birgeneau, Block and other UC administrators recognize that the single most socially explosive issue they and the whole American ruling class face in the near future is the denial of educational opportunity to this nation's rapidly growing and socially powerful Latina/o communities. The millions of families that have faced and withstood incredible levels of degradation and misery in order to live in the U.S. have persisted because they believed that this nation would offer their children the right to an education and the possibility for upward mobility.

The current efforts to privatize public education at every level and through this to deny educational opportunity and hope to millions of immigrant, Latina/o black and poor students of all races is a huge provocation, the stuff of urban uprisings, and if we do our job, the basis for building a mass civil rights movement capable of contesting for power and completely transforming the society.

Both the Birgeneaus who argue for privatization while maintaining a core of super elite public universities, and the Yudofs who argue for maintaining a broad public higher education system to maintain American world hegemony, agree that whichever policy wins out, the further exclusion of under-represented minority students will lead to a cataclysmic rupture in the social peace, which is already beginning to breach. It is crucial for us to draw this same correct conclusion and to understand the enormous power our communities possess and that each of us possess as leaders of our communities.

It is not mere coincidence that UCLA's Chancellor Block invited as his guests to the November 18-19 Regents meeting, the most prominent Latina/o and black student leaders at UCLA. Block's intervention at the Regents meeting centered on why the fee hike, which he supported, must be accompanied with a more concerted effort to increase under-represented minority enrollment. Instituting a social policy that makes the UCs more elite and more privatized, while doing nothing to redress the longstanding policy of denial of educational opportunity for Latina/o, black and immigrant students to a Block or a Birgeneau simply recreates a situation reminiscent of the Jim Crow policies of Northern universities in the 1950s and 1960s. These policies were a central element sparking the urban uprisings of the 1960s, and those uprisings were the key to forcing every Northern and Southern university to adopt affirmative action policies to desegregate higher education. The student struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, like our struggle now, relied on a tiny handful of black students and even smaller numbers of Latina/o students to be the vanguard.

The tiny number of black and Latina/o students accepted at elite Northern public universities in the wake of Watts 1965 and Detroit and Newark 1967, by 1970 led student struggles that shut down universities and completely changed the character of education at those universities. The student leaders who identified with or participated in the struggles to defeat Jim Crow segregation in the old South tended to be the most consistently radical and determined opponents of the whole structure of the society and the least filled with illusions in the liberal political leaders, because they were organically tied to the communities of the oppressed and felt accountable to those communities.

Today in California, the Latina/o communities are not only experiencing the new Jim Crow "racism without racists" and "unequal is equal" ideology and policies faced by all non-white communities, but are also chafing under old fashioned legal/de jure Jim Crow policies that assign undocumented Americans to a permanent, legal, second-class status. The youth who emerge from these communities, the black communities, other immigrant communities, and the Asian communities and who get to attend a UC are regarded as the pride of these communities, people to be protected and watched over, and an important confirmation of what struggle can achieve. The marches in the spring of 2006 for immigrant rights were the largest civil rights demonstrations ever in the history of this nation. Those marches established that the Latina/o communities are the most dynamic progressive force in this society, with the social power to shut down cities all over California and across the nation. Many of us were leaders of the walk-outs that inspired so many to demonstrate, march and boycott in 2006. A great deal of our confidence as UC student leaders is derived from our understanding that we have already been leaders to and have the backing of the most dynamic and powerful social force in the state of California. The struggle we are waging, even presented in the narrowest of terms-preventing further cuts or fee hikes in the UCs- have enormous support in our communities. The fact that our fight is presented in part as a defense of elitism does not take away from its power or popularity.

In April 2003, fifty thousand mostly black and Latina/o students came from all over the country to march in defense of the University of Michigan Law School's right to maintain its affirmative action programs. The march was compromised in its majority of poor and working class black and Latina/o high school students, who knew both that the UM Law School, a super-elite/privileged institution, would, even if we won, never be open to them, and that this did not nothing to blunt the fact that marching in defense of affirmative action was tantamount to marching to end separate and unequal, to realize Dr. King's Dream for America and to prevent the loss of the most important civil rights gains of the 1960s. The greatest gain of that successful action was not winning the UM cases before the Supreme Court, but that the successful action gave birth to a new youth-led, mass, independent civil rights movement.

Many of the more than one thousand-plus poor Detroit students who travelled down to Washington in rickety busses were treated appallingly badly by many UM black and Latina/o students, especially many of the recognized student leaders. The Detroit students, often the only black students prepared to march in Ann Arbor at UM to defend affirmative action, were often treated to the patronizing and insulting behaviors of black and brown elite college students who are super-nationalists around white people but fear and disdain any living relationship to their communities.

Parenthetically, one of the most frequent criticisms of BAMN made by other black and Latina/o student organizations was that we "organized high school students to march at UM." This was also a popular criticism of BAMN at UCB and UCLA prior to this year. Thank God for Big Changes. Still, neither the UM students' contempt for or abusive treatment of the Detroit students nor the fact that many of the under-represented minority student "leaders" had grown up in mostly-white upper-middle-class communities, cloistered away from the segregated and deprived conditions of the majority of our people, diminished the reality that in defending affirmative action, these privileged elite dislikable UM students spoke for the overwhelming majority sentiment of our communities and were community leaders and spokespersons. The question of who speaks for a community is in the end, objective, not subjective. Personal traits, motivations or intentions aside, if you are acting for the objective interests of your community, you are acting as its leaders.

Dr. King's erudite vocabulary, privileged social status and elite education did not qualify or disqualify him from being the most important mass leader of the last civil rights movement, and in many ways, the most significant leader of the anti-war and student struggles of the 1960s. What distinguished and qualified Dr. King's legacy as the most important spokesperson of the oppressed from the 1950s until his assassination, was the political program he fought for and his attitude of stridency, and that his unrelenting opposition to racism and inequality was not just rhetoric but was turned into action. Dr. King's ability to galvanize millions to act despite his personal remoteness and personal shortcomings are a model for any serious leader.

Whatever our internal conflicts or personal concerns are about being privileged or at an elite university, we must seize this moment to lead our campuses and our communities. We can change both if we recognize our power. Because our numbers are so tiny, most of us feel diminished and disrespected at least part of the time, constantly challenged to defend our right to even be on this campus. Many of us hate a lot about this institution and feel isolated and depressed way too much of the time. But we stick it out because we know that a UCB degree is of real value. Those of us that are community college transfers know that we received at least as good an education at our community college as we are receiving here. We stay here despite a lot of abuse for the same reason the defenders of white privilege want to drive us out- because we want access to the power and possibilities that accompany having a UCB degree. The question isn't whether or not we have privilege but rather whether we are going to use our privilege to win real gains for our people and all the oppressed or we whether we are, despite our words, mostly pursuing the wealth or status a UC degree can provide.

For the first time we are now in a position to change the dynamics on this campus and to increase our numbers. Many of the black and Latina/o leaders who are at the forefront of the new movement are on full scholarships. From a certain standpoint, the fee hikes will not affect us or the right of other poor students to come here. The students hit hardest by the fee hikes are those that are *undocumented*, solidly middle, and upper-middle class. We can make clear that our leadership of this movement is contingent on the movement demanding an end to Prop 209, an immediate increase in under-represented minority student enrollment and the passage of the Dream Act, and in the interim, the creation of private Dream Act scholarships. Within this institution, we must use our power to get the movement to adopt our demands, because, let's face it--really privileged students cannot effectively defend themselves against these attacks, because they are just beginning to experience hardship and struggle. Outside of the university, our privilege gives us a special status. When UC students march and rally, the nation takes note. When we stand up in defense of public education we stir others to act. Love it or hate it, our privilege gives us power. But there is nothing novel about this.

Frederick Douglass, the most important and successful American revolutionary of the nineteenth century, had to escape from slavery and the slaves he loved, and to embrace the relatively-privileged position of being a freeman living in the north, in order to free his people. His struggle to be a young leader is movingly documented in his great first autobiography, and is a must-read for all aspiring young leaders. Some of us have fled the poverty and oppression of our communities and/or the abuse of our families to be here. Like Frederick Douglass, we are struggling with the contradictions of our position and our people. But while we are engaged in our struggles for clarity, like Frederick Douglass, we have an obligation to embrace this brief interlude when we have the time and the space to think and to learn to act, to secure freedom for all. The fact that we are objectively in a tactical alliance with Yudof, Birgeneau and Block must not scare us. Douglass was in an alliance to end slavery with the leading capitalists of his time. The fact that we have a common interest with some of our administrators means that we can act without as much fear of repercussion. Our friends and family would face expulsion from school or the wrath of parents or principals or being fired or deported if they acted in an analogous way—if a militant minority of them occupied a job site or a school board office. Community college and CSU students are far more vulnerable than we are.

We are in a safe position to act to lead because of the anomaly that at least for now, Yudof and others in the UC administration are a minority voice within the American ruling class and they want to win. Yudof knows that without a movement, his attempts to defend public education in order to defend US hegemony, will fail. Hence his soft line on student protests, and his willingness to march on March 4. Our movement must remain politically independent of Yudof, and are right to refuse to join him in Sacramento, but to organize instead at our campus. Still, we must use this confluence of interests to maximize our ability to win support from school districts and city councils which can increase the turnout on March 4. We have no reason to fear Yudof "co-opting" our movement so long as we are prepared to build and act on a principled and independent basis.

The best and most important Latina/o and black students at the UCLA Regents meeting provide a great example of how we need to proceed. They utilized the method advocated by BAMN, that BAMN used to secure the 2003 victory for affirmative action. These students understood that there was no problem for the movement if they stood side by side with UCLA Chancellor Block. When they addressed the Regents they spoke for the interest we share with Block for the program of restoring affirmative action and ending the segregationist consequences of Prop 209.

At the same time, the students openly declared that they absolutely disagreed with Block on the question of the fee hikes. The students made clear that the fight to restore affirmative action and the fight against the fee hikes are inseparably intertwined aspects of the same fight, the fight to defend public education, and to protect the UC system's stated mission of providing a top-quality public education to all of California's best students. The independent militant leaders at the Regents' had their own idea of what integration really is and why affirmative action is so critical, and the action that students took at the Regents' meeting was out of Block's control. Undoubtedly, Chancellor Block believed that UCLA students whom he invited to speak to the Regents would restrict their protest action at the meeting to symbolic protests- choreographed die-ins or pre-planned arrests and releases- the kind of tactics that he assumed are too weak to win and that underscore the power of our enemies, to whom the protests are aimed at appealing for mercy or justice. He was wrong. Times have changed.

The Latina/o and black student leaders in the meeting flipped the script. They used their forced police expulsion from the meeting to raise the level of anger and to expand the protest action. By the end of the Regents meeting when they were able to block the Regents' exit from the campus, break through the police lines to shout and spit in the Regents' faces for what must have seemed like an eternity to the Regents, and to defy several police orders to disperse with no one taking an arrest, it was clear that the alliance with Block had been parlayed by the students into something that strengthened and emboldened the movement. So much for co-optation. No one has been expelled for leading the UCLA protests. UC Berkeley's policy to harass and brutalize students, especially the student leaders, are intended to intimidate those same leaders from leading campus struggles again. Continuing to organize and lead students at the campus, mobilizing everyone to join a statewide shutdown of California is a way to prove Birgeneau is wrong.

We have a lot of power! We must seize it and act.

January 30, 2010

Statement by Members of the Third World Assembly (TWA)

In Response to the Rhetoric of the "Privileged UC"

At the last General Assembly some activists brought up the need to take our struggle off of campus and into the community, arguing that UC Berkeley was a privileged institution. While we understand that the intentions of these activists were for the purposes of achieving solidarity with our communities, to those TWA members in attendance this argument was an insufficient analysis of the current objective conditions. First, this view unintentionally hides the struggle of students of color, immigrant students, workers, and all underrepresented communities within UC Berkeley who fight (a) to remain here and (b) to fully open the gates of this University to our entire communities. For us, UC Berkeley has always been an ongoing struggle, not a privilege.

For this reason we, the members of the TWA that were present at the meeting, want to shed light on the marginalizing nature of the comments made in the General Assembly, so that we may all advance this movement on the grounds of mutual solidarity. Only solidarity with all the oppressed sectors can ensure that we are in a position to succeed in this movement. Real solidarity with our communities' means fighting to end the segregation of all public education and working together to break down all the barriers that deny access to all underprivileged sectors. This means deepening our struggle within UC Berkeley, taking control of the UC and all institutions of higher education, and ultimately putting an end to the notion that the UC is a privilege; for us it's a human right. Our fight to rescind the fee hikes, the layoffs, the divestment from our programs and departments is tied to our communities fight for public education in the K-12, Community Colleges, State Schools, and Adult Education. Those that came before us fought to crack open the gates of higher education for our communities, now our generation faces the same responsibility.

In Solidarity,

Luis A. Reyes Z.

Eric Garcia

Xochil Alicia Frausto Patino Mendoza

Lucy Carrillo

January 30, 2010

Hello everyone. My name is Lupe. I am a Cal student. I participated in the September 24th rally (distributing flyers and sending direct contact with classmates). I circulated the petition to postpone any vote on the proposed fee hikes among UCLA, Cal, UC Riverside Alumni and parents, I traveled with two classmates to UCLA on Nov. 18th and 19th and was back on campus for the 20th, I went to Alameda Courthouse on Nov. 23rd, I was at LiveWeek during the first night and during the day on Thursday, I participated in a couple of NorCal Coordinating Committee meetings and have been reaching out to parents and clergy in my neighborhood. I've also read through the hundreds of emails regarding proposed letter and proposed actions and have signed my name to the letter circulated earlier this month.

I am responding to the group email for the first time because I agree with the perspective of the previous email. I signed up to work in the outreach group that got started during LiveWeek but was turned off because I was made to feel that if I found Cal "worth fighting" for I was not down enough, and perhaps I am not in the eyes of some of those in the struggle but I will continue to fight for a "fully funded public education system and full access to higher education by ALL."

I will support actions on our campus.

Thank you!

Lupe