

The Humboldt College Strike of 1970: Then It Was Vietnam, Today's Its Palestine

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Humboldt State College strike against
Cambodia Invasion, May 1970

When I read in the New York Times this morning this headline, "A Small Campus in the Redwoods Has the Nation's Most Entrenched Protest," about Cal Poly Humboldt's pro-Palestine activists there, I thought back to my own involvement in a strike at the same school, then called Humboldt State College, more than fifty years ago. Today the students have shut down the campus again as we did then.

In 1970 I was a Lecturer in English Literature at Humboldt State College, a forestry school in the midst of the redwood forests of Northern California. I had made friends there with a very sophisticated somewhat older student, Walt Sheasby. We were both about 25 years old. Between classes Walt and I would meet in the cafeteria to discuss sociology, literature, Marxism, and the war. Every Friday afternoon we held an anti-war meeting at the great redwood lectern, the campus free speech area. We would arrive, and then our twelve loyal followers would arrive. We would talk for half an hour or so and then go to town for a beer. At times it seemed hard to understand why we went through the motions.

Then, on Friday, May 1, 1970, Richard Nixon expanded the Vietnam War to Cambodia. Walt and I immediately wrote a leaflet about the events and between classes, we and others in our little group leafleted the campus. At the usual time we went up to the free speech area at the big redwood stump and lectern to hold our regular meeting, expecting we would have more than our usual dozen, perhaps 50, maybe even 100. This time though was different. Students started to line up: first

dozens, then hundreds. Walt and I and other activists took turns speaking, but the crowd just continued to grow and to stay, eventually nearly 2,000. We had to do something else. Walt said, "Listen, Dan, I'll take them for a walk through town. You stay here in case more come and when we come back, we'll hold a meeting." When Walt got back, we held a meeting urging everyone to return to campus the next day for an ever-larger general assembly to discuss the university community's response to the Cambodia invasion.

The next day, those gathered at that meeting proposed that we strike the university. At that time Humboldt State had about 5,000 students; about 3,000 showed up for the meeting and at least 2,000 students voted to strike. I was virtually the only faculty member directly involved in the strike and certainly the only one in the leadership. The strike went on for a week. Jerry Gorsline offered his Northtown Bookstore as the strike headquarters and Walt called the phone company and had two or three more phones put in the bookstore. Walt played the leading role in organizing the strike, helping to create the affinity groups that formed the strike's grassroots organizing base. Every night we held a strike steering committee meeting at the bookstore, usually with about 50 people in attendance, standing and sitting around a space that Jerry had cleared for us. Walt usually chaired the meetings. Everyone was allowed to speak and make suggestions. We usually began the meeting around 7:00 or 8:00 p.m. and it often ended after midnight. One night a guy showed up wearing strange headgear, a kind of optometrist's refractor with different lenses and shadings. The man in the strange contraption, who was clearly either on drugs or mentally ill, asked to speak. In this democratic spring, no one would deny him, and he stood up, fiddling with the different lenses and gave an incoherent half-hour speech.

The question was how to maintain and extend the strike. We held meetings, put out leaflets, and an artists' collective made a beautiful poster showing the assembly and the strike vote. We called for other large rallies on campus and organized marches into town. On May 4 we received news of the shooting of students at Kent State University in Ohio, and once again we held a large rally on campus. Now our strike was a protest not only against the war but also against the government's violent repression of the anti-war movement. Every student suddenly felt it could happen here. Walt established contact with a few other campuses and soon we were aware that our strike was part of a national student strike, one that eventually involved 900 campuses and four million students. Some had walked out like us with the Cambodia invasion, many others had joined after the attack on the students at Kent State. Everywhere across the country students had struck against the war, one of the greatest social movements in American history.

After the strike had gone on for a few days, the University president sent the campus Ombudsman to speak with us about ending the strike. We politely heard him out and then asked him to leave. A couple of days later the university organized a retreat involving the administration, professors and students to discuss the strike. Their goal was to end it; ours was to maintain it. We could find no common ground on that basis. We left the retreat determined to continue the strike.

After a week, however, with seniors worried about their final grades and others who were less committed and unwilling to risk their academic status, there developed a movement back to class and for a return to normality. The strike ended. We continued to maintain a strike center at Gorsline's bookstore for another week or so. On May 14 we learned about the two black students who were shot and several others wounded at Jackson State University, and we tried to organize some sort of protest against that, but by then the movement had become dormant and could not be revived.

The 1970 student strike at Humboldt State College and the strikes across the country represented a turning point in my life and in the lives of many others, I am sure. With that strike I had for the first time participated in a real mass movement, one with national impact. Working with Walt and under

his leadership we had produced leaflets and other literature, organized rallies, protest demonstrations, and marches. We had organized marches of hundreds, a mass meeting of thousands. We had called a strike and shut down the largest and most important institution in our region. I had learned half a dozen skills— speaking, writing, running meetings among others—and we had all gained confidence in ourselves. We had seen the movement come alive with tremendous power and it had thrilled us. I, and many others like me around the country, would be buoyed by that experience through the next ten years, riding high on the sense that a movement from below can challenge and eventually defeat the powers that be.

At that time Walt Sheasby recruited me to become a member of the newly founded International Socialist (I.S.), leading me a couple of years later to go off to Chicago to become a truck driver, an activist in the Teamsters, and a founder of Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU). Both of us became members of Solidarity when it was founded in 1986. Walt adopted the Mexican form of his name, becoming Walt Sheasby-Contreras and continued to be an activist in the Pacific Northwest as an eco-socialist. Sadly, he died of West Nile Virus in 2004. Edward Guthmann, a former staff writer for the San Francisco Chronicle, has also written an interesting account of the strike.