The People of This Generation
The Rise and Fall of the New Left in Philadelphia

PAUL LYONS

University of Pennsylvania Press
Philadelphia
the heroic resistance of the Vietnamese to American bullying and terror.53

The Philadelphia Resistance also faced agonizing choices in attempting to be a part of the broader struggles in the city, especially those addressing race and racism. In August 1970 they participated in the Philadelphia Regional Conference, which embodied a "microcosm of problems facing the radical movement in this country" and included antiwar, black, labor, and women's groups. On the last day, chaos erupted, initially when Roxanne Jones, the Philadelphia leader of the local chapter of the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), interrupted a workshop report that was stating its support for a $5,500 guaranteed national income. Jones attacked the conference for "talking big but not acting." Other women present connected Jones's attack to the marginalization of women's issues at the conference. It wasn't so much the issues as the tone, the single-minded anger: "there was not enough mutual respect or trust to allow for this kind of orderly proceeding. Each special interest group felt (all with some justification) that their vital interests had gone unrecognized."

If that was not enough, Mike Tinkler, a particularly abrasive representative of the Labor Committee, a Marxist-Leninist break-off from SDS, rose to challenge the funding aspects of the $5,500 demand. Bob Brand, frustrated over time with the Labor Committee's tendency to be obstructionist, "snickered and loudly interjected a sarcastic comment that the only correct position was that of the labor committee." At that point, Tinkler challenged Brand's earlier call that proposals must originate only from the group affected by the proposals, noting that "one wouldn't necessarily entrust the decision making in a mental hospital to the inmates." Brand, of course, disagreed in the spirit of empowerment. And, almost inevitably, most of the participants proceeded to excoriate Tinkler for comparing the oppressed, those on welfare, and minorities to the mentally incompetent. Following some heated argument, a black Communist decided that Tinkler's insults to black women required a beating. Only the intervention of co-chair Mohammed Kenyatta, the black leader of the Black Economic Development Conference, and some cooler heads prevented "a mini-race riot." Tinkler left and the meeting calmed down.54

Such confrontations had become all too common since the New Politics Conference in fall 1967. The Resistance struggled both to maintain comradely relations with such volatile participants as Roxanne Jones and Mike Tinkler—and many others—and also to sustain its own organizational and ideological integrity. They saw value in that "white radicals feel more guilty than ever about their role with regard to black people." But they understood that such feelings obscured the need to address the perception of white workers that a guaranteed national income was morally outrageous only in part because they would be paying for it with their taxes. The Resistance understood that, short of socialist revolution, a strategy was needed that brought poor and working-class whites and blacks together. It wasn't entirely satisfactory for the Resistance to argue that joining forces to oppose the war and shift defense spending to domestic needs was the answer. That would not be sufficient to attract those white, working-class ethnics rallying to Frank Rizzo, many of whose sons were most vulnerable to the draft. But they were on the money to bemoan that it "is a pity that so much energy is wasted in fighting over abstraction."55

The Philadelphia Resistance survived such encounters for the most part through their focus on a primary target—the war—and a series of ongoing antwar activities that kept them more pragmatic and, perhaps more significantly, on a more human scale than most of their organizational rivals and allies. For one, the young men of the Resistance were directly engaged in their own battles with the Selective Service System. Tony Avirgan had returned his draft card in 1967; he was indicted in mid-1968. Bob Eaton had returned his the year before. When any local draft resister was called before the criminal justice system, the Philadelphia Resistance was there in solidarity. When Dick Jennings refused induction in summer 1968, the Resistance created a "Chain of Life" by which he was linked to eight activists, with another seven in support. Resistance people helped organize the visit of over 1,000 activists to both Allenwood and Lewisburg federal prisons at Christmas 1968. Resistance activist Paul Golden showed up for his induction supported by the George Fend Memorial Draft Refusal Jug Band & Storm Door Company, "Resistance's answer to the Chester American Legion's OPERATION SENDOFF." In this instance, the Resistance was poking fun at Fend, the head of Philadelphia's Civil Disobedience Squad and the figure activists dealt with the most in the planning and executing of demonstrations and marches in the city.56

The Resistance's efforts at humor and solidarity helped to soften the grim realities facing so many young men. When Bob Eaton was sentenced to three years in prison in August 1969, there were 100 supporters in the courtroom and another 300 standing vigil outside, twenty of whom had chained themselves to the young Quaker when he was arrested. The court heard testimony on Eaton's behalf from Pastor Martin Niemoller, who had spent eight years in a Nazi camp; Devi Prasad, the Gandhian leader of War Resisters International; and
accommodate claims to both diversity and unity, group and corporate identity, separation and assimilation. Indeed, the struggle with these dilemmas continues.47

The Penn Sit-in of 1969

One of the most significant later campus struggles in the Philadelphia area took place at the University of Pennsylvania in early 1969. On February 18, 1969, Penn SDS organized a demonstration and march to begin at 11 A.M. in front of College Hall. After some speeches, several hundred marchers made a series of demands in front of the University City Science Center (UCSC), including a call for the return of UCSC properties to the local African American community; the granting of significant money by UCSC, Penn, and local bankers and realtors for community housing; and, returning to an ongoing concern, a declaration within the UCSC charter that absolutely no military or classified research be tolerated. The demonstrators returned to campus to confront President Gaylord Harnwell. At one point, a black militant from the local community threatened Harnwell: "I hope you don't croak before the revolution is over, because I want you around so you can be our puppet. You're going to have to be converted or eliminated."

The politics of gesture and rhetoric could not have been more striking: the white activists offered "hearty applause," and then the militant introduced himself, shook Harnwell's hand, and, turning to the television cameras, put his arm around the Penn president's shoulders. When Harnwell then called for time to reflect on the demands, Joe Mikuliak, the SDS leader, after being shouted down for trying to persuade the crowd to move to another room to discuss the situation, called for an immediate sit-in until demands were met. And so began a six day sit-in at the University of Pennsylvania College Hall. It was not an auspicious beginning.48

By academic year 1968–69, there had been several developments that would influence campus organizing efforts in Philadelphia, and specifically the Penn sit-in. For one, there was by this point a much more developed coordination and integration of areawide movement activities, especially those focused on particular colleges and universities. New Left students at the Catholic colleges still felt isolated and marginal and enormous transformations on their respective campuses and a much greater openness toward dissent. But they could feel part of a larger student, peace, and countercultural movement. It had always been the case that activist Villanovans joined with Bryn Mawr and Haverford radicals; by 1968–69 such synergies enveloped all the area colleges, including many not discussed in this study, such as West Chester and Cheyney State Universities, Lincoln University, The Community College of Philadelphia, Rosemont College, Chestnut Hill College, and Philadelphia College of Textiles. As such, when Penn SDS began its sit-in at College Hall, radical students from other campuses were aware of these activities, covered them in their newspapers and underground press, and offered some solidarity and people-power in support.49

In addition, there was a more problematic development: the existence of several Marxist-Leninist organizations, each determined to take advantage of local struggles, each relying on a dedicated cadre, the attraction of its ideological, strategic, and tactical certainties, and a willingness to outlast and consequently wear down all adversaries in the many meetings that resulted from campus activities. This was not a new phenomenon on the Left; the Communists and Trotskyists were notorious for using such manipulative and deceptive tactics in the 1930s. Throughout the 1960s, Old Left groups made operations problematic for radical and liberal activists who eschewed disingenuous infiltration techniques, the use of fronts, and the disciplined enforcement of political stances, or "lines." By early 1969, there were also the Marxist-Leninist remnants of SDS—for example, the Weathermen, Revolutionary Youth Movement II (RYM2), Maoist Progressive Labor Party, Trotskyist Youth Against War and Fascism, and, especially involved in the Penn struggle, the Labor Committee.50

The National Caucus of Labor Committees (NCLC, the Labor Committee) emerged out of a June 1968 SDS national convention and formed committees in New York, Philadelphia, and a few other cities. Its leadership included ex-Trotskyist Lynn Marcus, several activists expelled from the Progressive Labor Party, and a group at Columbia University. The Labor Committee became controversial when, during the Ocean Hill-Brownsville struggles over community control of public schools, they sided with the striking American Federation of Teachers. As a result, they were expelled from SDS; however, they continued to call themselves the SDS Labor Committee in classically Old Left manipulative mode.51 One of their key leaders, Steve Fraser, was a student at Temple University and sparked the growth of organizational support at both Swarthmore and Penn with a sharply ideological, pro-working-class analysis centering on what they called a "socialist re-industrialization" of the economy. The Labor Committee argued in favor of confiscatory taxes on what they perceived as wasteful and parasitic investment. Their sense of certainty, the appearance they gave of being more scientific, that is, more legitimately Marxist-Leninist than their rivals, the specificity of both their analysis and their
proposals, made the organization attractive to some New Leftists floundering after the self-destruction of SDS and wary of the adventurism of the Weathermen and other factions. The Labor Committee was the most important sectarian force during the sit-in at the University of Pennsylvania.52

Penn’s institutional history, especially that of the 1960s, also influenced the way the Penn sit-in unfolded. A significant number of veterans of previous student struggles—graduate students Jules Benjamin, Bob Brand, and several others—remained in the area and offered counsel on ways to resolve the crisis. There were faculty members—like Philip Pochoda, Sol Wirth, Charles Price, and Robert Rutman—with considerable experience in facilitating negotiations and effective communications between administration, faculty, students, and the community. And, although the Penn administration under Gaylord Harnwell had often handled student demands clumsily and had consequently played into the hands of the militants, there were examples of wise counsel, particularly from the Rev. Jack Russell, the university’s vice provost, who played a critical role in negotiating between groups. The Christian Association (CA) also offered its experience and mediating services at all times. Last, there was the local African American community, led by Herman Wrice of the Young Great Society (YGS), Andrew Jenkins of Mantua Community Planners (MCP), the Rev. Ed Sims from the Volunteer Community Resources Corporation (VCRC), and Forrest Adams from the Mantua Mini School, all of whom contributed to the negotiated outcome.53

The sit-in began as did many others of the late 1960s: impulsively, without a clear sense of direction but with the air filled with abstract and revolutionary rhetoric. Indeed, those involved were looking over their shoulders to possible worst-case scenarios, all of which focused on the risks of violent confrontation between this elite Ivy institution and the surrounding, low-income African American community. In that sense, the Penn sit-in was a permutation of the prototype—the Columbia University strike of April 1968. Yet the results sharply differed, in part because virtually all parties worked cooperatively to avoid the Morningside Heights outcome of a police assault on barricaded students and the ever-present concerns about the actions spilling over into Harlem.54

Joe Mikuliak, the SDS leader, noting that prior to the sit-in his group “had never had more than 150 people at a rally and . . . was often heckled to absurdity,” was surprised by the extent to which students rallied in support. The 350 became 1,000 by that first evening, a “most amazing and positive occurrence.” The fruits of earlier efforts, including the Christian Association, Project Mississippi, and the 1967 sit-in over secret research, all contributed to the outpouring of support in College Hall.55 Immediately, conciliating forces, spearheaded by the Rev. John Scott of the CA, began to reach out to radical and liberal students, administrators, and community activists. Late in the evening, SDS leaders negotiated guidelines for the sit-in, including procedures for discussion and, importantly, the ongoing access of all parties to College Hall at all times. A later CA report describes these agreements as setting “this demonstration apart from other campus demonstrations across the country” and setting “a tone of dialogue for all that followed.”56

Others saw things differently. The SDS Labor Committee always saw the issue of demands as “not goals or ends in themselves” but “a mobilization of student forces to be immediately linked as an organizing and rallying point, to members of the disorganized and fragmented black community,” all to be ultimately linked to the white working class. They wanted to focus attention on the ways the local corporate elite controlled the University City Science Center (UCSC) and, therefore, to hold them fiscally responsible for exploiting local blacks. As such, they demanded that UCSC construction be stopped and that its corporate sponsors provide 1,200 units of low-income housing as part of their reparations. From their perspective, the CA was engaged in liberal cooptation in alliance with the corporate elite, the university administration, SDS and liberal student leaders, and corrupt African American self-styled leaders.57

In fact, those seeking to manage the sit-in were initially concerned about disruptive responses from both angry mainstream students involved in Interfraternity Weekend and Frank Rizzo’s police. A rumor control center was established, and the striking students organized to ensure that College Hall remained clean and orderly. Perhaps most significantly, student leaders, including Dina Portnoy from the College of Women, persuaded both the Interfraternity Council and the Panhellenic Sorority Council to support the sit-in’s demands. Therefore, at an early stage, the radicals were able to portray themselves accurately as representing the majority of students. There was always a tension between radicals and liberals, but in this case they united against what they perceived as a common enemy: those like the Labor Committee and others, mostly not from Penn, who called for “barricading” the hall and preparing for violent confrontation.58 The liberal editorial board at the DP supported the sit-in but issued its own warning: “The University of Pennsylvania is a great university. We seek to improve it by cleansing it. We do not seek to destroy it.”59

This was important in that the Columbia strikers were prone to define the university in reductionist terms as merely the instrument of
capitalist, imperialist, and racist power. Many radicals by the late 1960s were viewing notions of academic freedom and an open campus as fraudulent, even pernicious covers for the university's underlying repressive nature. They welcomed stripping away the veneer of tolerance to demonstrate the true fascist core to those they considered naive. In brief, they had utter contempt for higher education, seeing it exclusively as an instrument of class power. Those who held such a view at Penn never achieved ascendancy.60

African American community leaders proceeded cautiously, with the City-Wide Black Community Council rallying behind West Philadelphians Wrice, Jenkins, Sims, and Adams. On the fourth day, Friday, February 21, Wrice offered the requests of a united black community for land, a community development fund, and a role in the decision-making process concerning university expansion. This became the students' position as well. That same day, the university trustees made their counter-offer, which included appointing students to a UCSC advisory committee; authorizing Renewal Housing, Inc., the nonprofit organization created by African Americans to address lower-income housing needs, to do a needs assessment; approving faculty condemnation of military research at UCSC; and forming a new council, including administrators, faculty, students, and community leaders, to advise on university-community development.61

Whereas most believed that negotiations were moving toward a successful resolution, the Labor Committee and other New Left elements were disturbed and sought to disrupt what they saw as a sellout. They criticized Penn SDS for saying, "We don't want another Columbia here." Others claimed, "The sit-in settled for procedural modifications, instead of intensifying the struggle to force acceptance of their substantive demands."62 The Labor Committee countered with an Alliance for Jobs, Education, and Housing, which they claimed represented the true interests of area residents and had the support of the local Black Panthers. Over the weekend, as the black community successfully addressed what turned out to be exaggerated Labor Committee assertions of community support, the student negotiators fended off Labor Committee demands, most being voiced by students representing other area colleges. As a result, the Labor Committee people walked out and, soon thereafter, the student negotiators achieved consensus. They then met with trustees and African American leaders on Sunday to finalize the agreement, which brought the six-day sit-in to a close.63

Those involved in the settlement claimed victory. Sociologist Phil Pochoda suggested that the outcome "may be the single greatest internal and external change in an American university." Anthropology professor Sol Wirth concluded, "Nobody lost. Everyone won. The University has gained in stature. It was a learning experience of unparalleled magnitude." The quadripartite commission, made up of five local residents chosen by Renewal Housing, five students chosen by the organizers of the sit-in, five faculty representatives of their senate, all but one of whom must be resident in West Philadelphia, and five trustees or their representatives, was mandated to implement the agreement that the university would match all housing demolitions with equivalent replacements, that a sizable community development fund would come from the private sector, and that $75,000 and appropriate office space would be pledged annually by the university to the commission for staffing and operations. Finally, sensitive to the criticisms from the Labor Committee and others about placing a tax burden on the white working class, the agreement called for new housing to "be funded not at the expense of a wage tax increase... nor a general lowering of the standard of living of the people of Philadelphia."64

Mikulak called the sit-in "one of the greatest victories for a radical movement at an American university," concluding, "We ain't stopping now, we got a movement now." Reflecting on the settlement years later, College of Women activist Lynne Hoagland, by then married to Mikulak, recalled, "We had a very 'bust head' police commissioner, and Penn could have easily called the police and said, 'get these kids outta here,' and they never did." And yet years later, liberal student leader Ira Harkavy, by then director of the Penn Center for Community Partnerships, noted that "nothing was really institutionalized" and that the trend of inner-city deterioration continued, despite the settlements and promises. As opposed to the earlier Penn struggle over secret military research, the College Hall sit-in produced more the appearance than the substance of change.

Mikulak's hopes for a growing New Left student movement were stilled by the complete disintegration of SDS. Penn, like many campuses, would explode in reaction to President Nixon's invasion of Cambodia in April 1970 and the subsequent killing of students at both Kent State and Jackson State. But for the most part student activism began to decline as the Vietnam War drew toward its end.65 As "acute apathy" reigned and a disappointing 200 students showed up for discussions of the quadripartite commission's plans, acid guru Timothy Leary drew 2,500 at the Irvine Auditorium, while 100 African American students called the Penn administration racist for firing a black administrator and failing to fund an essentially separatist advising program.66

Penn did not return to normal following spring 1970; indeed, the
very nature of normalcy had been transformed by the movements and events of the preceding half decade.

Frank Rizzo and the New Left Movement

At some distance in both geography and spirit from the Ivy League campus at Penn or the bucolic setting of Swarthmore, Police Commissioner Rizzo responded to black and white challenges with threats, scare tactics, intimidation, and, sometimes, the framing of activists. As he had moved against SNCC, the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), and the Black Panthers, so he went after NCLC while the University of Pennsylvania College Hall strike was being peacefully resolved.67

In February 1969, the Philadelphia police arrested eight members of the Labor Committee for distributing leaflets about the UCSC protests in front of two West Philadelphia public schools. Commissioner Rizzo justified the arrests by charging that evidence existed indicating that the Labor Committee was planning to blow up public schools, a ludicrous charge in light of the strikingly anti-adventurist public politics of this very small group. Two months later, the Civil Disobedience (CD) Squad raided the apartment of Labor Committee leaders Steve Fraser and Richard Borgman, claiming to find explosives they had heard about from an informant. Historians, as well as many Rizzo observers at the time and since, believe that the explosives were planted. A skeptical court reduced bail, and four years later the charges were dropped when the police failed to produce their informant.68

By the early 1970s, there were a variety of Marxist-Leninist sects in addition to the Labor Committee. There were a handful of SDS Weatherpeople, RYM2 activists, the youth affiliates of the Communists and Trotskyists—the Young Workers Liberation League (YWLL) and the Young Socialist Alliance (YSA) respectively—and a number of essentially local Communist groups seeking to reach out to the working class by moving into the river wards, especially blue-collar Kensington, and/or becoming what the Old Left called “colonizers,” that is, middle-class activists taking jobs in industry to connect with the proletariat. The most important of the latter was the Philadelphia Workers Organizing Committee (PWOC), some of whose leaders had been involved with People for Human Rights before it disintegrated and with the Free Press. Many of these activists understood that an essentially white, middle-class movement made up mostly of Quakers, WASPs, and Jews, strong on elite campuses and in affluent, educated neighborhoods like Center City and Mount Airy and seeking to align itself with the emerging African American political community, was at a
1. April 19, 1968, 3; April 22, 1968, 1; "Vietnam Commencement," April 25, 1968, mimeo, provided to the author from the personal papers of Josh Markel and Eva Gold.


27. *Temple News*, November 18, 1969, 4. Also see April 30, 1970, 3, 7, for an overview and critique of the New Left groups.


29. *Temple News*, April 30, 1968; May 15, 1968. There was also an organized BSL protest against a fraternity's use of minstrels; 500 demanded the censuring of Tau Epsilon Pi fraternity, March 29, 1968, 1; April 2, 1968, 1; *Temple Free Press*, July 8, 1968, 5.


34. *Temple Free Press*, February 17, 1969, 8–9; February 24, 1969, 3; April 21, 1969, 2, 3, 4.

35. *Collegian*, October 11, 1968, 1; October 18, 1968, 1; November 15, 1968, 3; March 18, 1969, 1; July 7, 1969, 4; September 9, 1969, 1.


37. *Collegian*, October 7, 1969, 2; November 17, 1969, 2. On crime on other campuses, see "Security Director Promises Better Job," *Hawk*, December 6, 1967, where three freshman were jumped "by a group of twelve Negro youths"; September 24, 1971, 1. The *DP* of 1968–69 is filled with reports of crime problems on and around campus.


44. Miller, "Negroes No More," 132–40; also see Downs, *Cornell '69*.


52. Fraser-Borgman mimeo, 18.


54. On the Columbia University events, see Dotson Rader, *I Ain't Marchin' Anymore* (New York: Paperback Library, 1969); Farber, *Chicago '68*, 96–97; *Sale*, SDS, 430–47; Jerry Avorn et al., eds., *Up Against the Ivy Wall* (New York: Atheneum, 1969). In the months prior to the sit-in, the *DP* was filled with stories of the spillover of crime from the community to campus—assaults, burglaries, robberies, theft.


57. Fraser-Borgman mimeo, 19–23.

58. *Bulletin!*, 4, 6. Indeed at nearby Drexel, Penn activists were initially shouted down, heckled, and faced with snowballs from hostile fraternity members who were won over to the extent that, in the following days, the Interfraternity Council apologized for their unfriendly behavior; *DP*, February 19, 1969, 1–2.

60. On attitudes about higher education, see Sale, SDS, 430—47; Isserman and Kazin, America Divided, 229—30; David Burner, Making Peace with the 60s (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 149—50; Gitlin, The Sixties, chaps. 13—17.


62. New Left Notes, February 28, 1969, 9, 11; March 7, 1969, 3, a letter from Ed Aguilar of Temple SDS, viewing the agreement as driven by the moderate faculty and community leaders like Wrice and noting that Penn’s Society of African-American Students (SAAS) was not involved in the process. In fact, SAAS played a quiet role and helped fend off Labor Committee claims of black support. They would focus on their own issues with the University, especially the establishment of a black studies program, DP, March 25, 1969, 1.


64. Bulletin!, March 11, 1969. 10, Appendix C.

65. “The 1969 College Hall Sit-in,” New Left Notes, February 28, 1969, 8—9. The DP described Penn SDS as “leaderless and directionless,” still wracked by ideological splits, Labor Committee pressures by the following term, September 30, 1969. Although a Student Plenum narrowly voted to support the creation of a sanctuary in Houston Hall for military deserters and resisters, the student body voted 2764—1873 against, DP, October 8, 1969, 1; October 15, 1969, 1.


72. Donner, Protectors of Privilege, 227.


75. See Community Peace Calendar, Philadelphia Peace Center, March 15—April 15, 1969; September 15—October 15, 1970, for the density of movement activities in those years; as late as 1972, see the list of community-based organizations as recipients of People’s Fund grants, February 17, 1972, Urb50, B22, F205, TUA. On gay and lesbian movements, see Marc Stein, City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves: Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945—1972 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), esp. Parts 3, 4.


78. Robert J. Rutman, “Statement to the Executive Board of SANE,” June 13, 1969, SANE Papers, Urb50, box 1, folder 8, TUA.


80. See Stein, City, 295 and chap. 12 for a different interpretation of the notion of liberation fronts.

81. Stein, City, 7—9, 17; Paul Lyons, Philadelphia Communists, 1936—1956 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982). Philadelphia’s women’s movement rarely appears in any of the studies of the origins and history of second-wave feminism; some Philadelphia feminists suggest that part of the reason is that they never generated their own media (feminist journals or newspapers), were less academic and campus-centered, and simply focused on the more practical tasks of building supportive institutions addressing women’s needs and interests, Hunt, Rogers, Shalleck interviews.


90. Philadelphia Inquirer, April 28, 2000, B22 on Rudofsky, Friedman, Braxton, Portnoy. Other information from the relevant interviews.

91. See obituary for Kuromiya, Philadelphia Inquirer, May 12, 2000, A1, A10; Stein, City, for Kuromiya’s role in the founding of the Philadelphia Gay Liberation Front, 316—18; Gracie obituary, Philadelphia Inquirer, May 24, 2001, B8.