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February 11, 1969

To All YSA Members

Dear Conrades,

Attached is a report by Chris Hildebrand, the Boston YSA organizer, on the recent events at Brandeis University. We are sending it out for the information of all conrades. All locals are urged to send in reports when developments like this occur in their area.

Conradely,

*Charlie Bolduc*  
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National Chairman

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REPORT ON THE STRUGGLE OF THE AFRO-AMERICAN SOCIETY AT BRANDEIS  
AND THE ROLE OF THE YSA by Chris Hildebrand

Background: After the assassination of M.L. King last April, the Brandeis Afro-American Organization drew up a list of demands dealing with the right to determine the nature of their education. In general, these demands were similar to those being used by other Black students around the country. The first demand, however, was for an independent black studies department with complete autonomy, with the students reserving the right to veto the selection of the chairman. This marked a new stage in such struggles for it meant that a black department chairman (selected by students) would have complete control over this department and that the administration would have no authority to intervene on any matters such as hiring and firing of faculty, course requirements, etc. Clearly, this was a demand that the administration could not grant on a token basis, it was non-co-optable and hence, unacceptable. After months of discussion producing no results, the black students were ready to take more persuasive action. Two students from San Francisco State came to speak at Brandeis and their story sparked the Afro-American Organization to decide to take over the campus communications building which houses the only computer and the switchboard. About 65 of the black students occupied this building. (There are about 120 Afro-Americans at Brandeis.)

Exceptional Nature of Brandeis: There are about 2600 students, including graduate students; blacks represent about 4%. The campus is highly intellectually oriented, liberal philosophy prevails and the overwhelming majority of the students come from wealthy, middle class Jewish backgrounds. The campus is very Zionist oriented, and claims to be supported entirely by wealthy contributors, not endowed. This was one excuse for a present lack of funds to carry out some of the demands - many of their contributors have been sending money to Israel instead of Brandeis lately. The faculty is very close to the students and likewise close to the administration. The faculty is dominated by social democratic types and several ex-Shachtmanites. The students are prepared to assume the role of liberal intellectuals, apologists for American society upon graduation. The students experience none of the feelings of oppression or alienation which students at giant state universities feel. Basically, they love Brandeis and if they didn't, they are intelligent and rich enough to go anywhere else they may choose.

You can imagine the tremendous gap between the typical Brandeis white student and the Afro-Americans, many of whom were recruited through Upward Bound programs and Transitional Year programs (without a high school diploma; some Vietnam veterans, other right off the streets of Roxbury and other ghettos). The black students feel

tremendous mistrust for the liberalism of the whites and outright contempt for their politics and for good reasons. Brandeis is located about 15 miles outside of Boston, on a beautiful hillside campus, pretty well isolated physically and mentally from the real world.

Political Groups: Unlike most campuses in the greater Boston area, SDS is relatively weak at Brandeis. They don't play much role in the regional factional struggles, with the exception of a few outspoken new-left types and about five people in P.L.'s so-called study group (kids not yet eligible for membership but who are highly disciplined, but more inept than party members). There is one member of the Spartacist League and one fairly new member of the YSA, and a few Resistance types.

The main center of activity so far this year had been a sanctuary, organized by Resistance, which drew many students who thrived on the moral witness-type atmosphere that prevails at these affairs. Through our intervention during the two weeks of sanctuary - literature tables, several speakers, contact work - we were able to get several people interested in our ideas, but nothing concrete developed because Christmas vacation interrupted the sanctuary and after the vacation the new developments occurred immediately.

Sandy, our one comrade, had been selling a tremendous number of Militants every week, primarily to black students, for the entire semester.

White Response to the Seizure of the Building: About 200-300 white students, primarily those who had been involved in the sanctuary, responded immediately by holding a peaceful mass meeting in the lobby of the administration building. They decided to remain in a non-obstructive sit-in as long as the black demands were not met and until amnesty was assured. For several days they couldn't go beyond this point. Meetings continued for 12-14 hours a day while these students philosophized and moralized and hoped the demands would be met, requiring no further action on their part. One of the most intimidating gestures was the presence of interested faculty who continually pretended to sympathize but regretted the unreasonableness of the black students and cautioned against opening another front. As I said before, the students are on a very intimate basis with the faculty and respect them abnormally. During these early days we continually tried to show the necessity for the black demands to be met, the need to involve more than 200-300 white students and the need for more concrete action. We proposed a general, open meeting to invite all students to come hear the facts, to try to win more support. This meeting finally came about but turned into its opposite, a general bull session, diverted from the issues by the leadership which had become self-appointed (mostly the old leadership of the sanctuary). No significant progress was made in winning more support.

That night at the sit-in meeting we proposed a picket line for the next day around Ford Hall (the communications center) to show

our solidarity and to have this in shifts so half the group could be in the dorms trying to convince more students to join the lines. The more political people (P.L., Spartacist, and several others) were also pushing for this while the majority remained paralyzed. After unbelievably long hassling, it was finally agreed upon and the next day the white students took their first step - a fairly disciplined picket line lasting about four hours. The main impetus for their action came when the administration withdrew amnesty and suspended all the black students in Ford. By that night, the white students had regressed to inaction again.

Besides all the reasons growing out of my initial description of the uniqueness of the Brandeis community, there were other more obvious reasons for the lack of activity on the part of the white students.

(1) The black students had made no attempt to enroll or organize white support. The Roxbury community responded to the occupation with much material and moral assistance but support stopped there. The white students felt isolated from the other 2300 Brandeis students and the faculty which stood firmly behind President Abran.

(2) The white students were suspicious and resentful of offers from outsiders for support, feeling that this would serve to further isolate them from the rest of their community.

The Role of the YSA: At this point, we in the YSA felt that we could wait no longer for the Brandeis students and had to act independently to build support. We decided to work with the black students directly, if possible.

We had had initial contact with the Afros during Derrick's tour in November through a closed meeting we set up at Brandeis. In addition, as I mentioned before, many of them knew the Militant and one of the leaders had attended a forum or two. We had been able to get an article for the Militant, with their O.K. on about the third day. Through Manny R., a very close black contact of ours, we approached the black students with the idea of putting out a newspaper for them - they would write it and we would see that it got published and distributed. The reason for this was to begin to counter the lies and slander that the administration had been feeding the press which had served to keep the blacks totally isolated and the truth of their struggle completely suppressed. The response to our suggestion was favorable so the project was set in motion.

We then called a Boston city-wide meeting of all contacts we could reach. The meeting was to build support for the black students. About fifty people showed up on pretty short notice. We explained the situation at Brandeis, the ineffective support being given by the whites, the necessity to bring community pressure on the administration in order to assure that the students wouldn't be crushed. I might add, that since the suspensions went into effect, an injunction had also been served and there was a real chance of police action to

remove the "trespassers." We had copies of the first Black Bulletin, to give this committee some concrete tasks - first, distributing the bulletins as widely as possible and raising money to pay for it and future issues. We called the press, who showed up at the meeting and issued a press release about the formation of the committee, sent telegrams of support to the Afro-American students and a telegram of support to Abram. We called ourselves the Boston Area Ford Hall Solidarity Committee. Some of the white students at Brandeis heard that we were going to call this meeting and came as representatives of their groups to ask us not to interfere, but after we explained what we were doing and why, most of them were won over and several of them worked very closely with us throughout the week and have become very close to us. We hoped that through a strong response from students outside of Brandeis, it would break through the feelings of isolation of white students at Brandeis, and give them courage to take stronger actions in support of the blacks. This seemed to work. By the next day they were talking seriously about a student strike. The better independent elements were pushing for a strike, and even though campus support hadn't grown significantly, we felt that this could still be built and we were among the strongest strike enthusiasts. Strike pledges were drawn up and close to three hundred signed. A strike was called for the next day and a 12 member strike committee chosen. Our comrade ran but was not elected, although his influence was felt.

Meanwhile, we mobilized all of our forces to distribute the first issue of the Black Bulletin (15,000 copies). The white students at Brandeis were very glad to get them because it gave them something concrete to go to other white students with to have them read and understand the demands and the need to support them.

The responses were tremendous everywhere. The next night we held another city-wide meeting which even more people attended. Two of the black leaders from Ford Hall came to the meeting with Manny and spoke about what was going on. Several Brandeis white students also came and were extremely impressed to hear the blacks because, as I said, the black students were so mistrustful of the white supporters at Brandeis, that they had no communication with them.

We drafted a petition and then set up campus meetings to discuss ways of supporting the struggle. The two most successful meetings were Boston University (50) and M.I.T. (90). Speakers from Brandeis attended and plans were made to collect money, distribute the Bulletins and collect signatures. We decided to have a caravan out to Brandeis in a few days to present the petitions at Abram, with a support rally. Hundreds of signatures were collected at Harvard, B.U., and M.I.T.

Meanwhile at Brandeis, the strike hadn't grown significantly, and finals were rapidly approaching. A petition was circulated among non-striking students to the effect that if 800 people agree to strike, I will too. The second addition of the Bulletin came out but only 400 signatures had been gathered at Brandeis.

Meanwhile, Manny was having meetings every night at Ford Hall with the leaders, giving them encouragement and advice which was very well received.

We had brought black contacts from the University of New Hampshire and Brown University in Providence to Ford Hall to see what was going on and to meet the Afros. This also was met with amazement from the blacks in Ford Hall who were well aware that the YSA was the only other group organizing support and they were very impressed.

After the first week, we learned through Manny, that serious trouble was beginning inside the occupied building. Several Afro members were suspected of being spies and provocateurs. The administration did seem to know exactly what was going on in there and seemed fairly confident that it was crumbling. As the time dragged on and no progress was made toward settlement (The blacks still maintained that the demands were non-negotiable, and the faculty and the administration refused to consider the first demand which was the central one - the demand for an independent black department.), white pressure on the administration didn't grow beyond the token strike. The group in Ford became dangerously split between what they later called the moderates and militants. (See third Bulletin for their description of problems which arose.) Finally after 11 days, pressure got too great and they decided that the demands could not be won and left the building. Their public position was that Brandeis was never going to grant them freedom so they would set up their department in the black community of Roxbury. They would boycott all classes in any black studies department set up by Brandeis, fight for course credit from Malcolm X University in Roxbury, and continue to fight for the implementation of the other nine demands which the administration had already accepted in "spirit". Shortly afterwards, the white students called off their strike in time for exams.

We had printed up a button for Malcolm X University, which was what they began calling Ford Hall, for the black students to further publicize the struggle and to raise money and support. These sold very well.

A third and final copy of the Bulletin came out explaining just what had happened with a political analysis by one of the leaders.

### Other Facts of Interest

#### Role of Our Opponents:

P.L.P.: They sent no cadre out to Brandeis until after the white strike had been called (5 days.) They preferred to work through their disciplined, totally incompetent periphery, so-called SDSers. They vacillated between direct mass action (pickets, strikes, etc.) and community organizing in the dorms. They were totally incompetent and didn't have any kind of consistent position. They finally ended up advocating that the white students seize a building. The one thing they were consistent on was that the problem was white racism,

and that to win the struggle we must defeat racist ideas in ourselves and the other students. One after another they would give long-winded speeches about racism, and that students must be convinced that it is in their interests to fight racism (all students) because racism is used by the ruling class to divide the working class and it is ultimately in the interest of students to ally themselves with the working class. The racist attitudes of students are hence really anti-working class attitudes and the ultimate barrier to a correct worker-student alliance. They won absolutely nobody to their position.

Independent Caucus of SDS(based on a universal desire to fight PLP): The Brandeis SDSers didn't have any political orientation and generally were in favor of direct action and unconditional support. They had some leadership on the strike committee, and generally agreed with us on what should be done but were hostile to us organizationally.

CP: They attended mass meetings but didn't intervene. They played no role.

The City-Wide SDSers: They are grouped around the newspaper Old Mole; they played no political role but offered their facilities to the white students to put out a strike daily. They obviously felt the pressure from our activities in Boston but refused to be drawn into the solidarity committee, preferring to work only with the white students. They did finally approach us for copies of the Bulletin to distribute.

On other campuses, PLP tried to push the same politics but at the B.U. meeting we succeeded in defeating them and convincing large numbers of kids to take direct action such as petitioning, and planning the caravan. PLP eventually through SDS began circulating the petitions too, saying after all it was a good way to get to talk to kids about their racist ideas. (Besides they had to show their support and had nothing of their own to do.)

Throughout the events we tried to point out that this was a struggle against the whole role of the university in capitalist society and that the demands of the black students for more say in their education was in the interests of all students. Also we pointed out that this was part of a movement that was sweeping the country, continually drawing analogies with S.F. State etc. and that it was part of a broader struggle for self-determination for the black community.

#### Lessons:

(1) We found out that in these circumstances it is very difficult to raise money from even the most radical professors, because they felt they would be betraying the interests of the Brandeis faculty who were standing solidly behind the administration against the attempts of students to take over departments. Only Zinn and

one or two others came through. We found that we could raise considerable money from student meetings, particularly at Brandeis where we collected over \$150 from the white students.

(2) Probably given the nature of the Brandeis community and the way the struggle developed, it would have been impossible to get too many more of the students to support the blacks by direct action, unless there had been police used or some other factor. However, the 200-300 could have mobilized more effectively had we had more initial influence and a larger fraction. Also more effort should have been made to draw the rest of the campus into some minimal form of support since they basically claimed that they supported the demands but not the tactics.

We will continue to work with the leaders of the black students, setting up meetings for them, publishing the Bulletin if they desire more issues, etc. One of them has already agreed to speak at our Forum.

This report may seem needlessly long, but I felt the necessity to explain the unique nature of Brandeis as I believe there are no other universities in the country where the same objective and subjective conditions will exist to create the special set of problems we had to deal with. Nevertheless, the struggle was very educational for our members; we made several concrete gains in the way of contacts and influence, and we mobilized and worked more intensely than during any other period. Every new member has grown in experience and commitment.