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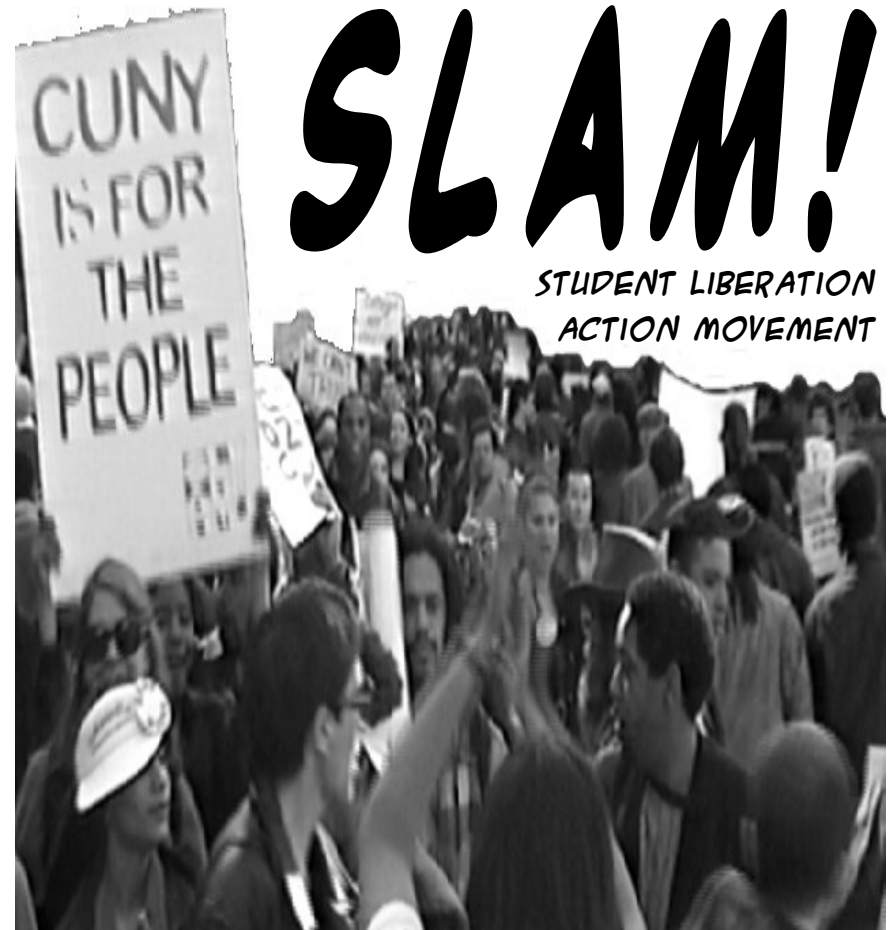
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*SOME THOUGHTS ON THE HISTORY OF*

# SLAM!

*STUDENT LIBERATION  
ACTION MOVEMENT*



*ONE SLAM MEMBER'S RECOLLECTIONS AND  
SUMMATION, FOCUSING MOSTLY ON THE  
1995-2000 YEARS. WRITTEN MARCH 2006  
ON THE OCCASION OF THE SLAM X TEN YEAR  
ANNIVERSARY EVENT, APRIL 1, 2006.*

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# Stop the Cuts!

Rally at City Hall  
 Thurs., March 27  
 3pm

SLAM!/CUNY Coalition to Stop the Cuts TEL: (212) 772-4261



## An Introduction...

This article was written in anticipation of an event in 2006 commemorating the 10-year anniversary of the Student Liberation Action Movement (SLAM). While my article touches on many key lessons from the history of SLAM and the student movement at the City University of New York (CUNY), I don't claim that this is a complete summation of the history of the either one.

It is the product of one participant in SLAM, so it carries with it the limitations and biases of my experience. I built SLAM at City College (and for one year at John Jay), while the center of SLAM within CUNY was at Hunter College. My experience is also one of being a white guy in a majority oppressed nationality group where many of the leaders were women. Those things should be taken into consideration when reading this.

SLAM is unique in the U.S. student movement in some ways, most particularly its multinational character. That is a result of the history of struggle at CUNY that opened up access for an incredibly multinational student body at one of the largest universities in the country in the middle of the largest and most multinational city in the country. In that sense the experience at CUNY is different than on most U.S. college campuses.


But in many ways the things that made SLAM successful are the same basic ingredients that most successful student movements have.

## Learn from the Past to Build for the Future

With the rebirth of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and with the new wave of student activism against the U.S. war in Iraq, there's a renewed interest in the history of the student movement. Most of the focus of that interest is on the 1960s and specifically on SDS. But the student movement didn't disappear between the end of SDS in 1969 and the rebirth of SDS in 2006. There was a lot of important student activism in between. This pamphlet is about one exceptional student organization that emerged in the mid-1990s – the Student Liberation Action Movement (SLAM). I hope this pamphlet helps to fill in one small gap for today's student activists about the history of the U.S. student movement. There are many lessons to be learned from SLAM – lessons specific to CUNY and also lessons that are more general to the student movement in the U.S. Since the article talks about many CUNY-specific lessons, here I'd like to talk about some of the more general lessons for student activism.

Come Together to build an independent student movement

# SLAM! Student Activist Meeting



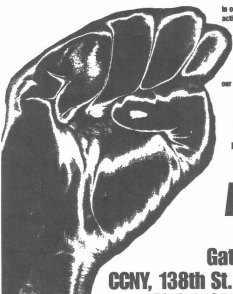
City College, Monday, Nov. 18  
 NAC Building at 7:30 pm

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# BROOKLYN SLAM!

## STUDENT LIBERATION ACTION MOVEMENT COALITION ORGANIZING MEETING FRIDAY, MARCH 7 • 12:30 227 NEW INGERSOLL

A few SLAM flyers from back in the day...

**In successful student movements, you generally find folks at the center of things who think consciously about how to build their group, how to bring in new people, and how to build a sustained campaign.** SLAM grew out of a broader coalition to fight budget and program cuts at CUNY. From the beginning SLAM brought together a number of people who had been in or around different left groups, as well as people who were active in some liberal groups on campus. This initial core of SLAM members built the movement to save open admissions at CUNY with all their hearts and souls, working in the day-to-day struggle around the clock for many years. They also talked with each other and reflected on the organizing they were doing in a conscious way to try to make it better. This created the basis for a powerful and sustained campaign that was able to bring new people into activism and which made the ruling class's attempt to end open admissions at CUNY much more politically difficult.

**Successful student groups need to be outwardly focused, always focusing on bringing in new people and working to make a difference on issues that matter on campus and in the world.** It's easy to get stuck focusing on a group's internal problems or on more relatively obscure questions that only interest a small handful. The original core members of SLAM, though many of them were already leftists or revolutionaries, were successful because they focused outward, reaching out and trying to organize broadly among students and the community around an issue that affected all CUNY students.

**Without building an ongoing progressive student organization, movements cannot be sustained through low points, gains from upsurges cannot be consolidated, and it's hard to pass along lessons to the next wave of students.** SLAM grouped together the student activists at CUNY who saw the need to build a campus-based activist organization that would last. At CUNY there are always attacks and crises. Often ad-hoc coalitions would form to respond. There were also always various left groups that would hover around CUNY activism to try to pluck advanced students out of the movement and recruit them to their group. But they were taking people out of the student movement, not building ongoing CUNY student organization. The initiators of SLAM had a different approach – they wanted to create a mass student group that would last so it wouldn't be necessary to reinvent the wheel every time there was a new attack on CUNY.

**The most successful student movements use the campaign method, focusing on a central issue and developing a campaign over a period of time.** SLAM's main focus was the fight to save open admissions and access to education for oppressed nationality and working class

the loud protest to SLAM and other CUNY activists. Some activists were kicked out during that meeting for being 'disruptive.' Based on the fact that they kicked people out of a meeting that was supposed to be open to the public, a lawsuit was filed that forced the Trustees to meet again and re-vote in a larger meeting room and without kicking out the public. They met again in January 1999 (while students were on winter break). SLAM mobilized, and hundreds of students came to protest at the re-vote in a large auditorium at LaGuardia Community College. This time the Trustees had to take their vote over the literally deafening screams of hundreds of SLAM members and other CUNY activists who packed the Trustees meeting to try to stop them from dragging CUNY backwards. At many other CUNY Board of Trustees meetings, SLAM members have organized huge protests outside the meetings, have held signs inside the meetings, and have stood up to disrupt meetings. In one infamous incident a SLAM activist jumped up on the Trustees' meeting table and stomped all over their papers, startling and horrifying the stodgy Trustees until he was dragged down and hauled away by CUNY cops.

Through mass mobilization combined with militant confrontation – in actions such as the above mentioned protests at the Board of Trustees meetings, and in actions such as the 1995 mass protest at City Hall and mass civil disobediences on CUNY campuses - the powers-that-be at CUNY and in New York have learned who SLAM is and what it stands for.

But SLAM did not emerge in a vacuum – SLAM was built on the shoulders of those who waged mass militant struggles to transform CUNY at key points before – particularly in 1969, 1976, and 1989–1991. The commemorations this spring of the movement to save Hostos in 1976 and of the founding of SLAM in 1996 will give more people a chance to learn about the proud history and continuing struggle for equal access to higher education at CUNY in New York. ★

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*Brad Sigal was a CUNY student activist from 1996-2000. He was a member of SLAM, editor of the CCNY Messenger newspaper and a member of the CCNY Graduate Student Council. He was a student at John Jay and City College from 1996 to 2000. He is now a rank-and-file union activist and writes for Fight Back Newspaper on labor issues.*

Why has SLAM been able to survive for 10 years, while usually student activist organizations are revolving doors with a short lifespan? SLAM benefited from many early leaders consciously mentoring new folks and helping to develop their politics and skills. Controlling the Hunter College student government for many years provided an institutional base that helped center SLAM and keep it going. Overall, SLAM managed to keep 'politics in command' and not have its politics or vision changed by being in student government and having to dedicate a significant amount of time and energy to the flood of bureaucratic tasks and procedures that student government entails.

SLAM experienced a “core-cadrification”, meaning that the core activists in SLAM developed an unusually high level of political unity around fairly radical politics. While on paper SLAM was a student group with specific goals of defending educational access at CUNY, in practice SLAM has generally had a higher level of unity than that. This has good and bad aspects.

On the good side, that cadrification has helped keep the group together for 10 years by providing a political home to folks who otherwise would have moved on to other projects during lulls in the CUNY movement. On the bad side, many people have (at times correctly) perceived SLAM as a group that you had to accept a larger program and worldview to join. While SLAM has been primarily about defending educational access at CUNY, it was clear that to folks in SLAM it was about a whole lot more than just that. This may have hindered SLAM's growth to other CUNY campuses where SLAM never developed because there wasn't a critical mass of student activists with radical politics there that identified with the larger vision of SLAM.

### **Mass Mobilization Plus Militant Confrontation...the Struggle Continues!**

SLAM has a rich and proud history of leading the fight for equal access to education in New York, during a period when that was under sharp attack. In 1998, the CUNY Board of Trustees officially voted to end open admissions at CUNY's 4-year colleges over

students. The governor and mayor were carrying out a systematic racist attack on CUNY students over a number of years. In order to fight against this, it was necessary to wage a protracted campaign focusing on defending open admissions.

**It is usually true that students who get active around one issue also want to support or work on other social justice issues that come up too.** That's a good thing because it helps students to make connections between issues and see the need for more profound social transformation (as long as there is still a central focus or campaign). While SLAM's central focus was on defending open admissions, SLAM also organized actions around other social justice issues like police brutality, immigrant rights, freedom for Mumia Abu Jamal, etc. This was possible because SLAM was built as a multi-issue group.

The student movement continually brings forward new activists who become revolutionaries as they study the history of social movements and learn from their own experiences in the struggle trying to bring about change. But students quickly graduate and then have to move on to other bigger life decisions (careers, relationships, kids, etc) that often make it hard to stay involved in activism. This is one reason revolutionary organization is so important – to help students and youth make the transition to other areas of political work when they aren't students anymore so they can make a lifelong commitment to the fight for social change.

### **Freedom Road and the Student Movement**

It is through the student movement that I first met members of Freedom Road Socialist Organization. One of the main things that attracted me to Freedom Road was their experience and approach to student organizing.

FRSO members have a long-term commitment to building student activism. Students from Freedom Road work hard on campuses to build vibrant and non-sectarian activist groups. They study how the student movement has worked historically and are committed to continuing to build it.

Freedom Road can trace some of its roots back to SDS in the 1960s and the New Communist Movement that grew out of that in the 1970s. FRSO's predecessors built the Attica Brigade and then the Revolutionary Student Brigade (RSB) in the 70s. FRSO members played an important role in the Progressive Student Network (PSN), as well as in the DC Student Coalition Against Apartheid and Racism (DC SCAR) and other oppressed nationality student movements in the 1980s. Today, members

of FRSO are active in the student anti-war movement, in building the new Students for a Democratic Society, in Colombia solidarity, immigrant rights and anti-racist struggles on campus, and more.

Aside from organizing in the student movement, FRSO members also organize in labor, oppressed nationality, anti-imperialist, and many other movements. FRSO proudly upholds Marxism-Leninism and builds toward a real communist party in the U.S.

Because of my respect for the work of Freedom Road in building the student movement, I am honored to have FRSO publish this article in pamphlet form. I hope people interested in the history of SLAM and the CUNY movement (and the U.S. student movement in general) will find this pamphlet useful.

**Study & struggle!**  
**Brad Sigal, May 2007**



*Rev. Al Sharpton and Dr. Leonard Jeffries speak at a CCNY forum to defend Open Admissions, October 22, 1998.*

University Program that brings mostly Dominican high school students to CCNY every week for educational and other activities.

CCNY SLAM continues this proud tradition of consciously linking to the Harlem community today, which is shown by their choice to call their school “University of Harlem” rather than CCNY. The Black students that won open admissions in 1969 were the first to call it Harlem University instead of CCNY, to emphasize that the college should be part of and should serve the Harlem community. SLAM continues the tradition and that struggle for a people's university rooted in the community.

### **Commemorating 10 Years of SLAM in 2006**

The event on April 1 will commemorate the founding of SLAM ten years ago in 1996. The fact that SLAM continues to exist ten years later shows that it has succeeded in one of its main goals - to provide a bridge across generations of students, and continue to lead the fight to make CUNY 'serve the people' rather than serving the rich and the corporations. SLAM is one of the few examples of a truly multinational student organization in the U.S. which is largely led by students of color but also includes white students. SLAM has continued to inspire and attract students looking for a radical, multinational activist group. There just aren't many groups like that out there.

Morales Community Center to spy on activists. When activists discovered the spy camera and went to the press and filed a lawsuit against the school, it was a huge embarrassment for City College administrators. They retaliated by then nullifying the student government elections that the activists had just recently won, then planning new elections the following Fall semester in which some activist candidates were disqualified and the other slates came together to push the activist slate out of the majority and then eventually attempted to kick them off the student government altogether.

The repression at City College is so sharp because it is located in the heart of Harlem and the administration recognizes the power it faces if activists succeed in truly uniting students with the Harlem community to reclaim CCNY as their own. Similar repression is faced by student activists at Hostos, because of its location in the South Bronx and historic deep ties to the surrounding community. For example one Hostos student government leader, Miguel Malo, was arrested in 2000 for simply holding up a protest sign on campus, and CUNY administration dragged his case through the courts for over five years.

The last thing the administration wants are students trying to forge links with thousands of community members to demand that CUNY serve New York's poor communities. The CUNY administration, under either the influence or threat of New York's economic elite, is going in the opposite direction, trying to make CUNY more responsive to business leaders, not working people. So they react severely against students or professors who are trying to break down the walls between the university and the most oppressed communities such as Harlem and the South Bronx.

There have been important efforts at CCNY to make links to other struggles in Harlem and Washington Heights, such as bringing prominent Harlem activists such as Al Sharpton to speak at CCNY about open admissions in 1998 in an event that electrified the campus community and particularly Black students; and working with Harlem Hospital workers in 1998 in their fight back against massive budget and program cuts. Most importantly in terms of community links, there has been an ongoing collaboration between CCNY activists and a Dominican immigrant based Pre-

This spring, two important commemorations will occur to celebrate the history of militant student and community struggle at the City University of New York (CUNY), one of the largest and most important public university systems in the U.S., made up of 17 separate campuses and over 200,000 students spread throughout New York City's five boroughs.

On March 25 there will be a 30-year anniversary celebration of building takeovers by South Bronx community members and Hostos students to save Hostos Community College in 1976. Hostos is a CUNY campus with a largely Latino and immigrant student body located in the South Bronx.

On April 1 there will be an event commemorating the 10-year anniversary of the founding of the Student Liberation Action Movement (SLAM!) in 1996. SLAM! is a multi-national radical student organization. It grew out of a mass movement to stop tuition increases and cuts to Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) at CUNY in 1995. That movement included sit-ins that led to mass arrests at City College and Hunter College, and culminated in a (non-permitted) massive march of 20,000 students on City Hall not long after Rudolph Giuliani was elected Mayor of New York. SLAM! continues as an active radical CUNY student organization.



### **The Struggle Over Who CUNY Serves**

CUNY is not like most university systems in the U.S. CUNY was founded in 1847 as the "Free Academy" to educate the working class and had free tuition from 1847 until 1976. The large majority of students are from working class and poor families, and the majority of students are oppressed nationalities.

But CUNY hasn't always been that way – continual rounds of student and community struggles since the late 1960s transformed CUNY from an almost-all white institution to a university that attempted to reflect the class and race of the students coming out of New York City's high schools. In 1969, the few Black students that were at CUNY's flagship campus, City College (CCNY) in Harlem, with support from the surrounding Black community, took over campus buildings demanding that the mostly-white City University should adopt 'open admissions' so that Black and Puerto Rican high school graduates in New York City would get a chance to go to college and get the support they needed when they got there.



Two students from the Open Admissions strike in 1969 escort CCNY President Gallagher to a meeting with the striking students. The 1969 strike opened CUNY to all New York high school graduates.

After a series of building takeovers and fights against cops and some racist white students, along with rounds of negotiating with CUNY administrators, they CUNY administration gave in and agreed to open admissions for the following school year. Literally overnight, the class and racial composition of CUNY was radically transformed, and CUNY became an institution that to a much larger degree than before 'served the people' of New York City rather than being a mostly-white bastion aimed at mostly serving business interests.

### Hostos: Born With the Open Admissions Struggle

Hostos Community College, named after Puerto Rican revolutionary educator Eugenio María de Hostos, opened in 1970 in the South Bronx. It is a bilingual school, where 80% of the student body speaks Spanish as their first language. Many classes are taught in Spanish. The South Bronx is an extremely poor and largely immi-

the CCNY Black Studies Department and its' leading faculty members, particularly Prof. Leonard Jeffries, in the early 1990s. And just in the last year there was an unprovoked police attack on a peaceful student protest at CCNY against military recruiters, and the attempted suspension of student activists after the fact. Due to a strong public pressure campaign, the students weren't suspended. The repressive atmosphere at CCNY also included repeated attempts to restrict the ability of activist students to put up flyers and reserve rooms for events on short notice, and successful administration attempts over a period of years to deny funding to the activist newspaper, CCNY Messenger. There was also an attempt to shut the Messenger down entirely by kicking it out of its office space and taking away its production equipment in 1998.

The repression at CCNY was exemplified by two widely reported and related incidents in 1998 – secret spying on student activists and the cancellation of the student government election that activists had won. The Shakur Morales community center is a student activist run space in CCNY's NAC building, with the mission of building activist links with the Harlem & Washington Heights communities. The creation of the Shakur Morales center was one of the demands that was won by the CCNY student building takeovers in the 1989-1991 upsurge.

In 1998, the administration of CCNY President Yolanda Moses installed a hidden surveillance camera outside of the Shakur-



Front cover of Harlem's Amsterdam News, June 4-10, 1998 reports on students Ydanis Rodriguez, David Suker and Brad Sigal's discovery of CCNY administration's secret spying program against student activist meeting space in NAC 3/201

such as Anthony Baez and Amadou Diallo. Hunter SLAM also ran a very successful High School Organizing Project for years.

SLAM didn't take over student government at other CUNY campuses like they did at Hunter, though some SLAM members held seats in their student governments at other schools, just not on an all-SLAM slate.

At Brooklyn College, SLAM educated and mobilized students to fight tuition hikes and other attacks on CUNY, and participated in all the city-wide demonstrations. Brooklyn College SLAM members also organized with other student groups on many issues that came up on campus.

City College SLAM members were (and continue to be) very active in fighting attacks on City College & CUNY, and in educating and mobilizing around broader issues too. CCNY activists have faced more severe repression than SLAM activists at other campuses. This included multiple suspensions of a prominent CCNY student leader and SLAM founder, and a mass arrest of almost 50 students sitting in the NAC student center in 1995. The repression at CCNY in the mid-late 1990s was preceded by severe attacks on



*SLAM members leading a protest*



*SLAM and the CCNY Coalition march at CCNY in 1996.*

grant neighborhood. CUNY students in general and Hostos students particularly are not stereotypical American college students. A 1986 CUNY study showed that 42% of the Hostos student body came from households where the family income was less than \$4,000 and 75% of the students had family incomes of less than \$8,000. The same study showed that 96% of the students at Hostos were non-white. Another study showed that three times as many CUNY freshmen came from low income households as the national average for students at public colleges and a majority of CUNY students work during their first year, more than double the rate for college freshmen nationally. 56% of CUNY students are self-supporting, 23% are supporting children and over 60% are women.

Hostos was born in the context of the radical mass movement for open admissions that reshaped CUNY in 1969. As part of the open admissions transformation, CUNY developed much closer links with community-based activists and institutions throughout New York. New campuses opened with close links to impoverished neighborhoods: Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn (named after the famous civil rights leader), Hostos in the South Bronx, and York College in Queens.

### **The Right-Wing Backlash and the Continuing CUNY Student Movement**

The powers-that-be were not happy with the new CUNY, which actually started to serve the needs of the vast majority of New Yorkers. The power structure had only given into the demands for Open Admissions and the creation of Black and Puerto Rican Studies departments in a context of the rising revolutionary upsurge among oppressed nationalities in the US and a general move toward radical and revolutionary politics among youth overall. This context caused local ruling elites around the country to offer up some concessions in hopes to stave off greater attacks on the system. In this context even Richard Nixon started to use the term "black power" and supported affirmative action. But the elites did not want to see these changes, and as soon as they implemented them they started to strategize about how to take away the gains the people had just won.

From the beginning they tried to counter-attack and chip away at CUNY's open admissions policy. One early step along that path came with New York City's financial crisis in 1975. They took advantage of that to start to charge tuition for CUNY for the first time in its history – “coincidentally” in the same school year that CUNY became majority students of color for the first time in its history. The capitalist class of New York also took advantage of the economic crisis that year to propose closing some CUNY campuses. At the top of the list they wanted to get rid of was Hostos Community College.

In the face of then-Mayor Abraham Beame's proposal to close Hostos in 1975, the South Bronx community mobilized to save it. According to organizers of the Hostos 30-year commemoration event, “From late 1975 to May 1976, the Coalition to Save Hostos organized petition drives, demonstrations, a takeover of the Board of Higher Education, a mass sit-in at 149th Street and Grand Concourse, and three takeovers at the college including the first one which lasted 20 days.”



*March in 1976 of the Save Hostos Movement*

This is the piece of Hostos history that will be commemorated this March 25th.

The 20-day takeover of the college in 1976, the longest in the history of the City University of New York, was the key battle in a long campaign to prevent the school closing.

Twenty years later, in the mid-to-late 1990s there was another wave of sharp and racist attacks on Hostos and its mission to serve the people of the South Bronx. The fight in the 1990s to defend Hostos students under attack was one of the many fights that activists from SLAM! participated in.

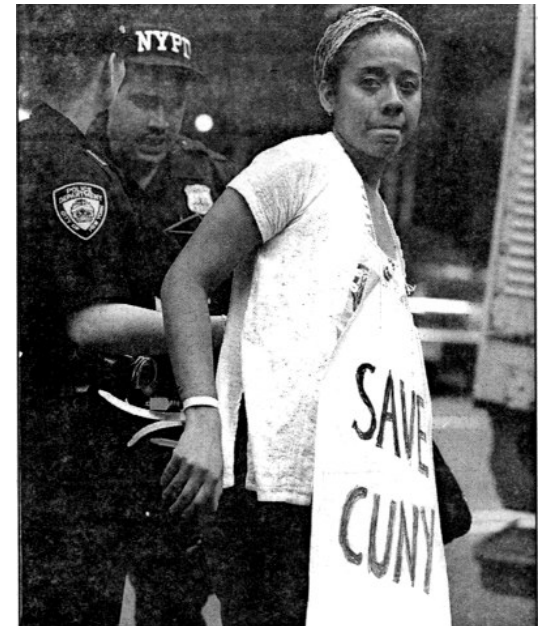
### **The Mix that Gave Rise to the Student Liberation Action Movement (SLAM!)**

After the wave of CUNY protests in 1995, a core of activists from

strongest at Hunter, where the SLAM group ran a slate for student government in Spring 1996 and won every seat. Hunter SLAM continued to be an activist group with activities outside of student government, but they swept Hunter student government elections for 7 years in a row, running Hunter's student government until 2003. The Hunter College student government anchored SLAM during those years.

SLAM used their position in student government to lead mobilizations against the attacks on open admissions and on CUNY students, including countless rallies, speak outs, protests, and a takeover of the Hunter president's office in the early 2000s. Members of SLAM also essentially ran the Hunter student newspaper, the Envoy, making it a vital movement paper and a strong advocate for radical activism for a long stretch of years as well.

Year after year, Hunter SLAM would host CUNY-wide activist meetings and initiate demonstrations to organize CUNY-wide fight backs. Hunter SLAM also successfully mobilized Hunter and CUNY students around other progressive and radical issues. For example in 1996 they sent buses of CUNY students to a national march in DC for immigrant rights; in 1998 they sent 10 buses of Hunter students to protest for



*Sasa from Hunter SLAM being arrested at an open admissions protest on May 26, 1998*

Mumia Abu-Jamal in Philadelphia; in 2000 Hunter SLAM played a key role in the protests against the Republican Convention in Philadelphia. SLAM also mobilized students and community members to demonstrate against NYPD murder and police brutality cases

So if SLAM hadn't come together, it's likely that none of the other existing forces in the CUNY movement would have mobilized students to oppose the ending of open admissions.

Some leaders from the 1995 movement were mindful that just a few years prior to 1995, there was another wave of militant and successful protests and building takeovers to defend CUNY against Governor Cuomo and Mayor Koch's attacks in 1989 and 1991, but that there were few people from that movement who were still around in 1995 to pass on the lessons from the earlier round of struggle. The 1995 activists hoped to avoid students having to keep reinventing the wheel every time new attacks came down. They also hoped to create a broad student organization that would unite students of varying shades of leftist thought around action, rather than dividing them up into separate ideological-based student groupings, as some other forces in the movement practiced. The hope was that SLAM would be an organization to carry on the tradition of struggle at CUNY for years to come.

### SLAM Rises and Grows

SLAM had members at many of the CUNY campuses, including Hunter, City College (CCNY), Brooklyn College, John Jay, Hostos, Queens College, the CUNY Graduate Center, and has had contacts and supporters at other campuses at different times. But SLAM was



*SLAM protests at the Board of Trustees in 1998*



*Mass march of 20,000 CUNY students and supporters at City Hall in 1995*

that movement created a new organization in Spring 1996: the Student Liberation Action Movement (SLAM).

The 1995-1996 CUNY movement brought together an uncommon mix of a significant number of students who had previous organizing experience with various left and mass organizations, and a large number of people involved in their first political activity. The combination of politically experienced folks that came out of many different organizations along with lots of new folks and new energy created a volatile and powerful mix.

A key goal in creating SLAM in 1996 was to consolidate many of the CUNY activists who came together in 1995 into an organization to continue to fight back against the sharpening attack on access to CUNY led by Mayor Giuliani and Governor Pataki, while not being limited to just being a "single issue" organization.

The 1995 CUNY movement was remarkably multiracial. One of SLAM's hallmarks has always been having strong leadership from women of color. This contrasted with earlier rounds of struggle at

CUNY which often tended to have male-dominated leadership.

Another important feature of the 1995 CUNY student movement was a widely shared belief that the CUNY movement should be independent, and specifically should not be a platform for the Democratic Party. In 1995 some key Democratic Party activists in New York City tried in various ways to take control of the direction (and politics) of the growing CUNY movement. Because there were many politically experienced people with radical politics in the mix, they saw what the Democratic Party types were trying to do and were able to counter such moves.

There was also a key struggle within the CUNY movement in Spring 1995 about whether to get a permit or not for the mass protest of 20,000 people at City Hall. The decision to hold an unpermitted protest was hotly debated but was ultimately decided democratically by hundreds of student activists in mass meetings. The resulting police attack on the march and mass arrests by the recently-elected rabidly-pro cop Mayor Giuliani caused some to debate the wisdom of marching without a permit after the fact. Nonetheless the decision to march without a permit was a key formative decision that helped set the tone for what became SLAM – a group dedicated to taking direct and independent action.

Safeguarding the independent character of the movement allowed SLAM to develop more radical politics without being hemmed in by what was acceptable to the Democrats and without falling into the rut of endless focus on mainstream electoral politics.

Efforts to guide the CUNY student movement in a more ‘liberal’ and ‘acceptable’ direction didn't just come from outside the movement – there are also organizations within the student movement that are closely aligned with Democratic Party and with economist politics that downplayed or ignored the question of racial and national oppression in the attacks on CUNY and were therefore unable to effectively respond to the attack on open admissions.

The University Student Senate (USS) and NY Public Interest Research Group (NYPIRG) are examples of two groups that SLAM has worked with over the years with such politics. USS is widely seen as linked closely to Democratic Party politics and played almost no role in responding to the attacks on open admis-



*CUNY students protest Governor Cuomo's proposed cuts in 1989.*

sions at CUNY. And NYPIRG plays a generally good but limited role – they mobilize students to lobby politicians in Albany around purely economic issues.

But after 1995 the attacks on CUNY were not primarily economic – the attack was against open admissions. The attack on open admissions had an economic aspect, as it would most severely affect students from the lowest sectors of the working class. But in fact the attack on open admissions is a directly racist attack aimed at driving large numbers of oppressed nationality students out of CUNY.

In the face of the attack on open admissions, neither USS or NYPIRG took a clear stand in favor of open admissions or made any significant effort to mobilize students to stop the attacks. NYPIRG could only talk about the most narrowly economic issues like tuition increases, and this attack wasn't a tuition increase. While many NYPIRG members also joined the movement to defend open admissions, as an organization they weren't able to respond coherently. USS was hamstrung by careerism and a desire to be more an electoral playground than an organization that would use its considerable resources to lead a movement to defend CUNY students under attack.