



image by Christina Barrera

Realizing the Dream of a Liberation University

- Conor Tomás Reed

[Verso Blog](#)

In a May 5, 1976, City University of New York board hearing to impose universal tuition for the first time in its 129-year history, the Black radical poet-educator [June Jordan](#) expressed outrage as one of [thirteen City College professors on hunger strike](#) to demand that CUNY remain free. She lauded CUNY's historic access to poor European immigrant students, but noted that once Black and Puerto Rican student-led movements successfully fought in 1969-1970 to desegregate the university's admissions and decolonize its curriculum, free education suddenly became imperiled. Jordan framed this moment in terms of collective survival, warning that it would bear grave consequences for the city.

We cannot accept the death of this great, free University because we cannot accept the death of the spirit, the death of aspirations, the death of the future, that will surely follow for our children, the students... We will fast. We will take a cut in salary. We will fight. The possibility that we may lose is not a possibility: we have to win... we call upon all of the people of the City of New York to join with us on behalf of all the children and all of the students of the City of New York, to resist this death.

Jordan was part of a groundswell of CUNY faculty, staff, students, and city residents (many in the [SEEK Program](#)) who enacted sweeping anti-racist working-class reforms in the late 1960s to mid 1970s—including to desegregate CUNY’s admissions by welcoming all New York City high school graduates, and to decolonize the curriculum by creating Black, Puerto Rican, Asian, and Women’s Studies departments and programs—which would impact the families of millions of New Yorkers across the city. Not content with fleeting campaigns that erupted but then cooled out each semester, they positioned themselves for years (and some, decades) in the nation’s largest public urban university to transform the university into a strategic site of liberation. However, after a 1973 international oil crisis and 1975 U.S. military defeat in Vietnam, the federal government ushered in sweeping privatization policies, proclaiming that it would only save New York City from bankruptcy if an unelected Emergency Financial Control Board were allowed to slash public services such as free college education.

A [wildcat strike committee](#) formed within Jordan’s union, the Professional Staff Congress (PSC), urging workers to reject tuition costs alongside an austerity job contract that the PSC leadership argued was the best it could do. As these union organizers [feared](#), the Fall 1976 tuition policy coincided with almost [5,000 layoffs](#) of faculty and staff (including all [adjuncts](#)), the erasure of recently won ethnic studies classes, and threats to close new CUNY colleges like [Hostos](#) and [Medgar Evers](#). The subsequent “[retrenchment period](#)” at CUNY resulted in massive city and state budget cuts, skyrocketing tuition fees, and expanded adjunct faculty ratios whose exploitation was enshrined by multiple PSC-CUNY contract agreements. Despite episodic flashes of explosive opposition from radical CUNY and community advocates, the university system was eviscerated over a period of over four decades. In this way, the CUNY system has been a “shock doctrine” laboratory that coincided with the rise of neoliberalism, and is therefore a key battleground for the undoing of this punishing economic model that has presently morphed into a veritable [death cult](#).

In 2020, a re-emerging movement to “resist this death” of CUNY faces a compounded crisis of tragic proportions. The global Covid-19 pandemic has [killed more people at our university](#) than any other in the country, and many of New York City’s 23,600+ deaths are within a few degrees of relation to the CUNY system, including alumni. Amidst an economic dive, the CUNY administration [laid off 3,000 adjuncts](#) (and, thus, hundreds lost their healthcare coverage) as well as terminating countless other campus workers for the Fall 2020 semester, and is even [hoarding federal CARES Act money](#) that could have been used to rehire these workers. [1 in 2 CUNY students](#) already food- and housing-insecure now suffer increased unemployment and danger of eviction, while a thriving urban farm at Kingsborough Community Garden is at [risk of closure](#). #CutCovidNotCUNY organizer [Kelsey Chatlosh](#) notes, “Governor Andrew Cuomo has said [there’s not enough money](#) to fully fund education, health, housing, and other life-sustaining services — but New York City historically has one of the wealthiest tax bases and the largest police budget nationally at about [\\$6 billion annually](#).”

These cataclysmic conditions urged groups like [Free CUNY](#) and [Rank and File Action](#) to reassess strategies for how to leverage maximum resistance and mutual aid in the time/space of an academic calendar under compulsory distance learning. If, as [Marx and Engels](#) argue, the ruling class creates its own gravediggers, and by extension, the university is a spatial concentration of both

exploitation and the latent site of its own overcoming, what happens in a period of pandemic learning when the job site/graveyard becomes the entire city? Taking inspiration from [multiple university tuition strikes](#) and [Santa Cruz grade strikes](#), we realized that the CUNY machine cannot function without students paying tuition at the start, staff maintaining myriad campus functions, and faculty submitting grades at the end. Beyond these basic and essential functions, the rest of the semester is merely [ideological exchange](#) and [settler-colonial control of university grounds](#). While Free CUNY plans for a future [tuition strike campaign](#), RAFA enacted a dress rehearsal for a [grade strike in the Spring](#), and now urges the PSC union to coordinate a [broader strike preparation campaign](#).

However, the PSC union's leadership has floundered at the test of converting this rare crisis into an organizing wave. For example, as RAFA organizer Boyda Johnstone lamented, A potential back-to-school strike or real escalation action devolved into a [24-hour telethon](#) that made it almost impossible for real engagement and live interaction from union members[, and] some content had to be aired multiple times because they couldn't find enough[...] amidst ALL THIS, my union decided to slice out 40 seconds at the end of a phonebanking segment where we promoted a pledge to call the PSC to hold a strike authorization vote.

In a conjuncture where the last few years have seen more [teacher's strikes](#) than in the last few decades, the PSC leadership's bizarrely [stagist](#) theory of labor mobilization posits the necessity to phone-call every single union member before it can utter the word "strike," and is therefore freezing up in the face of the largest crisis since 1976. In contrast, rank-and-file organizers have taken inspiration from the likes of the [Combahee River Collective](#) and [Daniel Bensaïd](#) that "We might use our position at the bottom, however, to make a clear leap into revolutionary action."

In this spirit, explosive summer Black Lives Matter 2.0 mobilizations boomeranged across the university, where calls by Black, Indigenous, and People of Colors (BIPoC) faculty, staff, and students to create anti-racist campuses abounded at [Brooklyn College](#), [CUNY Law School](#), [Hunter College](#), [Lehman College](#), and elsewhere. These were preceded by a Fall 2019 Latinx Student Alliance campaign to [decolonize the Lehman English curriculum](#), as well as Spring 2020 Puerto Rican Alliance demands to [confront structural racism at Brooklyn](#), which has evolved into the formation of the [Anti-Racist Coalition](#). ARC organizer [Rhea Rahman](#) explains,

Recognizing the profound connection between austerity measures and systemic racism, and that any broad-based financial cuts will always impact those already most severely marginalized, activists called on administrators, as well as the broader Brooklyn College community, to imagine what a Black-life affirming campus might look like.

Further initiatives by [Free CUNY, the People's Cultural Plan](#), and Rank and File Action have also emerged to kick cops out of CUNY, K-12 schools, and the labor movement. RAFA organizer [David Klassen](#) argues,

Police unions drag the whole labor movement to the right. They are institutionally incapable of solidarity, [whereas] any labor leader attempting to claim solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement who does not confront the pernicious role of cop unions in perpetuating police oppression is not helping, and their symbolic gestures and statements are empty.

Meanwhile, the new social media campaign [#DreamCUNY](#) is boldly stoking our imaginative visions by asking “[what would the CUNY of your dreams be like?](#),” as it works to identify how these ideals can become realities through collective action.

Within the last few years, as this array of abolitionist anti-racist visions have taken flight, a bureaucratized representational version of racial justice has also appeared at the top ranks, with CUNY hiring its first [Puerto Rican Chancellor](#), who appointed the university’s first presidents of Asian and Dominican descents to oversee austerity measures and educational redlining. Since Open Admissions was demolished in 1999, the enrollment of Black and Latinx youth (who comprise 70% of NYC public high school students) entering CUNY’s five most well-resourced four-year colleges has steadily declined, by some measures from 17% to 10%. [Black and Latinx students](#) have more often been diverted into CUNY’s cash-strapped four-year colleges, and moreso its two-year colleges, where they pay for mandatory no-credit remedial classes, and many ultimately leave without a degree.

As a result, while CUNY overall is still diverse post-Open Admissions, it’s intensely segregated and unequal school by school. But this admissions pitch doesn’t work too well, so within the last several years, [Black and Latinx students](#) have disproportionately appeared in CUNY multi-ethnic success stories on subway and social media ads, even as the university tries to squeeze them down and out. The actual enrollment and graduation records of Black and Latinx CUNY students are distorted in order to maintain the flow of their tuition funds and [outside funding](#).

However, as is the case more broadly in the United States, the rapidly shifting terrain of racial-economic justice at CUNY is not reducible to the binary of either BIPoC liberation or the election of Biden/Harris. Instead, the present university organizing milieu involves a spectrum of political actions that may accelerate, maintain, coopt, slow down, or suppress the riotous multi-ethnic energies that shook the country in the early summer months after the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Rayshard Brooks, George Floyd, Tony McDade, Sean Reed, Oluwatoyin Salau, Breonna Taylor, and more.

We see in CUNY that within and adjacent to this upsurge of militant anti-racist organizing, an entrenched liberal current of [allyship](#) in the PSC union tokenizes BIPoC workers and students while admonishing more insurgent complicities between movements in the university and across New York City. This “[woke white liberalism](#)” emerged within the last twenty years of CUNY’s accelerated neoliberal shifts of managerial bureaucratization and faculty/student resegregation after the end of Open Admissions, such that [Euro-American faculty](#) were able to advance in their tenureable/tenured positions by producing progressive (enough) scholarship and [virtue-signaling](#), as poor multi-ethnic co-workers and students were increasingly squeezed by worker adjunctification and rising tuition.

As in the larger BLM movement, debates have flared up in CUNY on which speeds and intensities of militancy are most effective—and who should participate—in envisioning and enacting an anti-racist, free, fully funded, and liberatory university. While the threat of retaliation by police and campus administrators is very real, this concern has sometimes served to decelerate campus direct action organizing efforts that are akin to what has proven demonstrably effective on the streets. However, sometimes a [diversity of tactics](#) can actually bring in broader layers of participation

where people can decide in which levels of risk they wish to engage. Indeed, the CUNY administration and the broader economic and political elite must be pressured on multiple fronts for them to rehire workers, dramatically expand resources for CUNY, and reverse systemic institutional racism.

Ironically, during a time of the largest ferocious racial-economic justice movement seen in two generations, stern warnings by Euro-American tenured faculty to support Black leadership may at times be used to actually undermine political debates about which strategies and tactics are most effective to mount broad pressure toward maximal gains, or be used to prioritize fighting institutional racism at the expense of improving our learning and working conditions (which is also an anti-racist struggle!). [Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor](#) warns that the “unspoken promise of racial representation is that social, economic, and political dynamics can change when someone from a marginalized group is at the helm. Too often, however, in Black politics, symbolism has stood in for making a meaningful difference in the lives of Black people.” This ambiguous call to follow Black leadership may thus, at worst, allow neoliberal Black leaders (like [Medgar Evers College’s president](#)) to be protected in a moment when they’re being forced out by multi-ethnic CUNY faculty, staff, and students.

As Cindy Milstein’s indispensable anthology [Taking Sides: Revolutionary Solidarity and the Poverty of Liberalism](#) argues, “Black leadership” is not politically monolithic, and therefore our actions mustn’t be monolithic. Or in the words of June Jordan’s CUNY colleague [Audre Lorde](#), “There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.” Multi-ethnic involvement in BIPoC liberation and anti-austerity/anti-racism struggles should not be reduced to being solely burdened with setting the movement’s direction or quietly following orders, but by forging active strategic collaborations across differences that can seize on this rare moment to attain multi-issue transformations that were unthinkable even one year ago.

What could this look like? More broadly, the labor movement has recently embraced the language of “[Bargaining for the Common Good](#).” This strategy was powerfully expressed by the Chicago Teachers Union, where a 2019 contract fight demanded [affordable housing for students](#), and that the government [fund schools by diverting debt payments from banks](#) that profited from economic crises. Also in 2019 at Rutgers University, the last contract [redistributed salary gains to women and/or tenureable faculty of colors](#) (although [adjuncts were left out](#) of these gains). However, the PSC union typically frames “bargaining for the common good” as union members calling each other to learn about their different needs, and to build solidarity with students via the PSC-controlled “coalition” CUNY Rising Alliance (instead of working with actual grassroots student-faculty-staff-community groups like Free CUNY).

This August, PSC union officials released ten demands to “[Save Lives, Save Jobs, Save CUNY](#),” which include not a drop from the wave of anti-racist demands that surged across the university system throughout the summer. If these ten demands were combined with the demands of Brooklyn College’s Anti-Racist Coalition, CUNY Law, Hunter, Lehman, and beyond (as the [Brooklyn PSC chapter](#) suggests), then we could activate them altogether instead of continuing to silo them as “racial justice” or “economic justice” issues respectively. Similarly, as seen in an August “[Unite Our Struggles](#)” march in Brooklyn, CUNY struggles can be linked to the cancellation of rent

and evictions, decriminalization of sex work, (actually) defunding and disarming the police and ICE, no more cuts to hospitals and health care, hazard pay for essential workers, unemployment extension and expansion, and more.

Expanding upon the visions of another CUNY Black radical cultural worker, [Toni Cade Bambara](#), to realize the dream of a Liberation University, we must synergize all of our efforts at racial justice and economic justice—at CUNY and across New York City—as an enmeshed struggle that requires the scale and intensity of collective involvement that reconfigured our university fifty years ago, and whose legacies we have had to fight to retain (and remember) ever since. A strike wave at CUNY could activate our quarter of a million students, almost fifty thousand faculty and staff, millions of alumni, twenty five campuses, and over eighteen million of our neighbors across the five boroughs. Dozens of [unions](#) and workers' centers, hundreds of community organizations, and thousands of nascent sites of militancy will need to co-choreograph with us what will happen when we refuse one form of labor and enact another.

Combining the energized lessons of pandemic mutual care, Black Lives Matter's resistance to racial capitalism, and an overall reprioritization of society that has blossomed in this most volatile year, CUNY could become one of many strategic epicenters of fundamental social change. While there are tremendous obstacles—in the form of the PSC union's bureaucratic demobilizations, the administration's brokerage-style version of identity politics, [Governor Cuomo's resistance](#) to taxing the ultra-wealthy, and the tailwinds of the presidential election—nevertheless a growing base of multi-ethnic movement militants, deepening relationships, and organizing skills are converging to advance a set of anti-austerity/anti-racist demands that will only be achieved through bold decisive strike action. If we want to create the university of our dreams, we must arise to our already existing powers to transform it.