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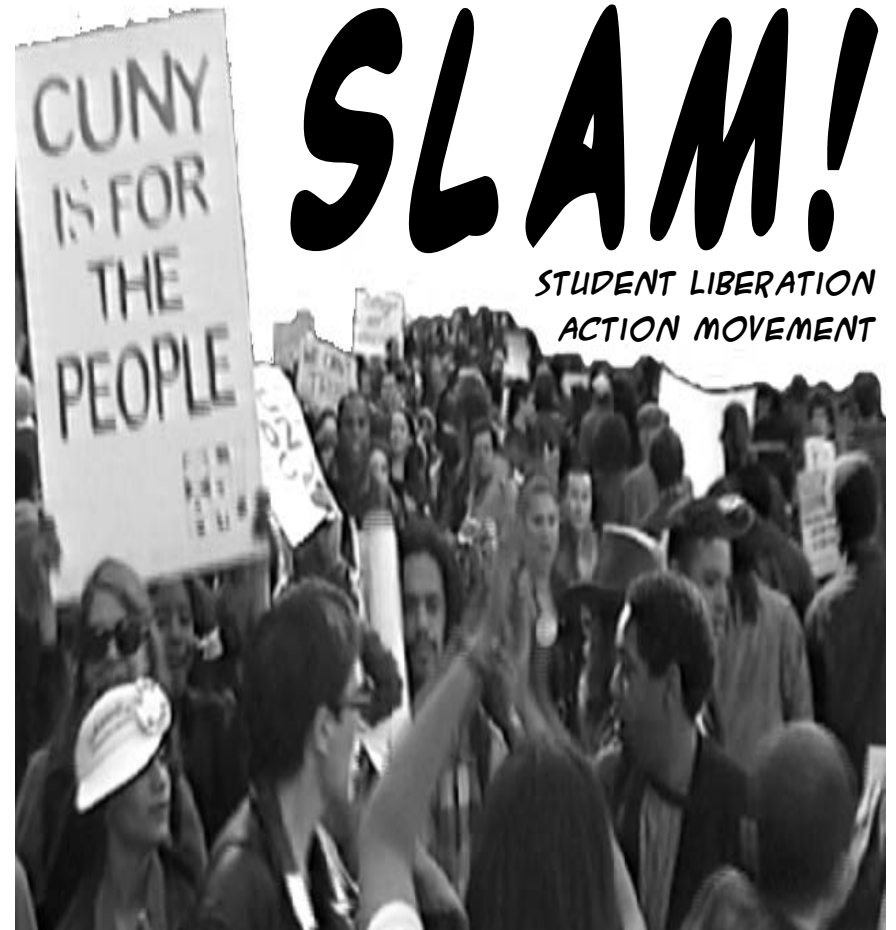
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SOME THOUGHTS ON THE HISTORY OF

# 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.

FREEDOM ROAD SOCIALIST ORGANIZATION  
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## An Introduction...

This article was inspired by and written in anticipation of the event commemorating the 10-year anniversary of the founding of SLAM (Student Liberation Action Movement) in 1996. While my article touches on many key lessons from the history of SLAM and the CUNY student movement, I don't claim that this is a complete summation of the history of the either one.

This is the product of one participant in SLAM, and as such it carries with it the limitations and biases of my experience in building SLAM at John Jay and at CCNY, while the center of SLAM was at Hunter College. There has been some talk of a putting together a collective summation of SLAM. I support that and hope that my article can make a small contribution to that process.

There is one key lesson I'd like to talk about here that is not fleshed out in the article – the role of revolutionaries in SLAM, and the need for communist organization in the people's movements.

SLAM burst onto the scene at a time when the revolutionary left was largely in disarray in the years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In that context, SLAM brought together young people who had been in and around many different left groups. Because SLAM was a mass organization with radical politics led mainly by people of color, it was able to pull together many revolutionary-minded young people looking for a political home.

There were many revolutionaries who dove into the CUNY movement and SLAM with all their hearts and souls, working in the day-to-day struggle for many years, both teaching and learning from those around them. That was a big part of why SLAM developed such dynamism and brought forward new activists and new revolutionaries year after year. A large number of people who came through SLAM are still active in progressive movements and some are supporters or members of revolutionary organizations.

When I got involved in the CUNY student movement, I was a member of a left group called Love & Rage. A number of Love & Rage members went to CUNY and got involved with SLAM. Love & Rage was dissolved in 1998 in a split that was partially about how revolutionaries should do mass organizing. Some people in Love & Rage didn't like the work that those of us in SLAM were doing. In effect those folks thought we should be putting out abstract revolutionary propaganda unconnected to where the struggle was at, and they had no answers for how to deal with the real questions and contradictions that posed themselves to us as revolutionaries in the CUNY movement.

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

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.*

A group of us in Love & Rage were transformed by our work in the CUNY movement. Out of our experiences we gained an appreciation for Mao’s writings on the mass line, and for some of the foundations of Marxism like dialectical and historical materialism, that helped us make sense of what we were experiencing and give us practical guidance in building the mass movement.

Some SLAM members have gone on to join or work with different revolutionary organizations. That’s a good thing. While mass organizations like SLAM are vital to the revolutionary process, they are not enough. There is a crying need for national revolutionary organization, rooted in the working class and oppressed nationality movements, which can bring together activists to fight for more than reforms – to fight for socialism. I came to see that even more clearly from my experiences at CUNY.

It is through my experiences in the student movement that I came to know and appreciate Freedom Road Socialist Organization. Unlike some left groups, FRSO has the humility to admit that they are not “The Party”. But unlike others, FRSO has not lost sight of the fact that there needs to be a real communist party in the U.S. based on Marxism-Leninism. That is what FRSO is building toward.

Freedom Road has much experience in the student movement, as well as deep roots in labor, oppressed nationality, anti-imperialist, and many community-based movements. In those movements, FRSO applies Mao’s writings on the mass line, on contradiction, and on the united front (among other things), to the contradictions facing the people’s movements to help move the struggle forward.

Freedom Road has a revolutionary line on the national question and on fighting national oppression in the U.S. Freedom Road is committed to building mass movements and mass organizations over years and decades, applying revolutionary theory to practice and learning from the people involved in the struggle.

It is only through revolutionary organization that lessons – both practical and ideological – can be passed on to new generations of activists. And it is only through developing a new communist party in the U.S. that has deep roots in the working class and oppressed nationality movements, and that is based on Marxism-Leninism, that socialism will be possible.

Because of my appreciation and respect for the work of Freedom Road in building the people’s movements, I am honored that they have offered to publish my article in pamphlet form. I hope people interested in the history of SLAM and the CUNY movement will find this pamphlet useful.

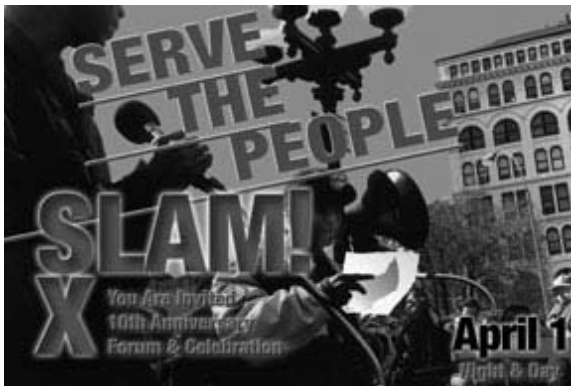
**Study & struggle!**

**–Brad Sigal, March 2006**

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 stu-



dent 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.

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



*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**

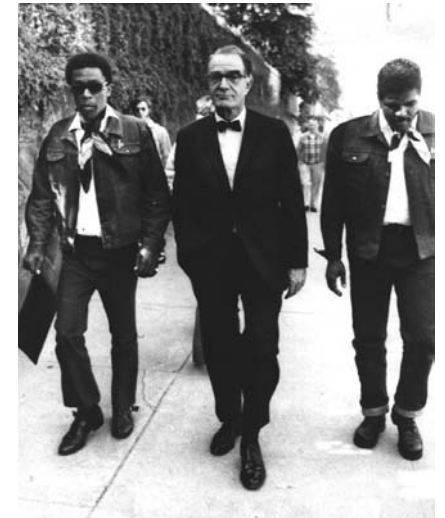
The event on April 1 will commemorate the founding of SLAM ten years ago in 1996. The fact that SLAM continues to exist ten years later shows that it has succeeded in one of its main goals - to provide a bridge across generations of students, and continue to lead the fight to make CUNY 'serve the people' 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.

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.

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-



*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.*

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.

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-

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-

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.”

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



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



March in 1976 of the Save Hostos Movement





*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

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



*SLAM members leading a protest*

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 and the CCNY Coalition march at CCNY in 1996.*



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 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



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

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.

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*