

NY Times, Mark Rudd on anniversary of Columbia U sit-in: Socialist revolution is a “fantasy”

By Patrick Martin
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Mark Rudd, the most prominent leader of the student protests at Columbia University in April 1968, one the seminal events of the 1960s radicalization in the United States, has written a thoroughly dishonest and politically reactionary commentary on that experience in an op-ed column published Monday by the *New York Times*.

Under the headline, “The Missing History of the Columbia ’68 Protests,” Rudd briefly describes the protests directed against the university’s collaboration with the US war in Vietnam and its plans to expand into nearby Harlem at the expense of the black working class residents of that Manhattan district. Students occupied five buildings, but were eventually driven out by a police assault in which hundreds of students and supporters were beaten and tear-gassed and more than a thousand arrested.

Rudd goes on to bemoan the alleged neglect of the role of black and female students in both contemporary and historical accounts of the Columbia events, writing that “this history which privileges the actions and concerns of white students like myself, is incomplete. ...”

If the main purpose of this account were to rewrite 1968 from the perspective of identity politics, it would be of little interest. Such efforts are pervasive in academia and the media. They are politically aligned with the focus on race, gender and sexual orientation used by the Democratic Party for the past four decades to disguise its steady shift to the right and its increasingly overt hostility to measures that would improve the living standards and social conditions of working people.

But Rudd concludes his column with a remark that explains why the *New York Times* chose to run his column. “As for myself,” he writes, “after a rocky few years pursuing the fantasy of anti-imperialist and socialist revolution, I settled into a lifetime of teaching and organizing.”

This passage is an oblique reference to the author’s role in the Weatherman organization, set up by former leaders of the Students for a Democratic Society. Under the influence of Maoism, they fought in street battles with the police, went “underground,” and engaged in sporadic bombings, mainly notable for killing three of their own members, who died in a Greenwich Village townhouse in an accidental blast in 1970.

Rudd resurfaced in 1977 and turned himself in to the police. He was sentenced to probation but no jail time since he had not actually participated in any of the bombings. He has spent his life since then as a teacher of remedial mathematics in the New Mexico community college system, retiring a few years ago.

Despite its radical pretensions and glorification of violence, the Weatherman organization had nothing whatever to do with socialist revolution. It was based on a politically illiterate amalgam of Maoism and anarchism that was clear on only one question: the rejection of Marxism and its orientation to the working class as the leading revolutionary force in modern society.

The founding document of the Weathermen, adopted in the summer of 1969, declared: “[A]ny conception of ‘socialist revolution’ simply in terms of the working people of the United States...is a conception of a fight for a particular privileged interest” (cited in *A Hard Rain Fell: SDS and Why It Failed*, by David Barber, 2010).

Instead, the Weathermen glorified the individual violence of a handful of radicalized young people, most of them, like Rudd, drawn from privileged layers of the middle class, and some, like co-founder Bill Ayers, literally the children of the ruling class (his father was CEO of Commonwealth Edison).

In his 2010 memoir, *Underground: My Life with SDS and the Weathermen*, Rudd wrote what could serve as his

own political obituary: “Much of what the Weathermen did had the opposite effect of what we intended. We de-organized SDS while we claimed we were making it stronger; we isolated ourselves from our friends and allies as we helped split the larger antiwar movement around the issue of violence. In general, we played into the hands of the FBI. ... We might as well have been on their payroll.”

While Rudd, Ayers & Co. were indeed acting out a “fantasy”—guerrilla warfare within “the belly of the beast”—the political conditions prevailing in the United States and worldwide in the period that opened up in 1968 were indeed pregnant with revolution. Governments around the world were shaken by mass revolts, and in many cases toppled altogether.

The year began with the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, which shattered the claims of the Johnson administration that it was winning the war against the National Liberation Front, leading to a political crisis within the Democratic Party and Johnson’s announcement—only three weeks before the Columbia protests began—that he would not run for reelection.

Only a few days after the Columbia events, the French working class erupted in the greatest general strike in modern history—May-June 1968, in which 10 million workers seized virtually every factory in the country. Socialist revolution in France was derailed only by an all-out effort of the Stalinist French Communist Party, and even so, President Charles DeGaulle was ousted within a year.

There followed, over the next seven years, mass strike movements in Italy and Germany (the latter marking the coming to power of the Social Democrats for the first time in 40 years); the “Prague Spring” movement in Czechoslovakia, ultimately suppressed by an invasion by the Stalinist Warsaw Pact countries; the ousting of the Tory government in Britain by a nationwide coal miners’ strike; the collapse of the regime of Greek colonels; and the revolution in Portugal that put an end to 50 years of fascist autocracy.

Outside Europe, the period 1968-1975 saw colonial revolutions in Angola and Mozambique and mass upheavals across Latin America, including the near-revolution in Chile that was drowned in blood by Pinochet’s CIA-backed coup, in another colossal betrayal by Stalinism. In the United States, the Watergate crisis culminated in the forced resignation of President Richard Nixon in 1974, followed by the final humiliation of US imperialism in Vietnam with the collapse of the puppet

regime in Saigon in April 1975.

The capitalist rulers survived this period only thanks to the betrayals of Stalinism, social democracy and the trade union bureaucracies, supplemented by the political disorientation engendered by the leaders of the New Left and the Pabloite opponents of Trotskyism, who either glorified the Stalinist regimes in China and Vietnam or simply dismissed the central problem of building a new revolutionary leadership in the working class.

The real history of this period is a closed book to demoralized ex-radicals like Rudd. Having sowed a few wild oats in their youth, they have long since made their peace with American capitalism and the Democratic Party. In an interview in 2016, Rudd paid tribute to Bernie Sanders, declaring, “Bernie’s candidacy absolutely shook the Democratic Party to its neoliberal roots. Imagine what we could accomplish if we had a real socialist movement, not just a single courageous, tireless old guy running for the presidency. We could turn the Democratic Party into a party of the people.”

Rudd looks back on 1968—a year when revolution was truly in the air, from Chicago and New York to Paris, Prague and Berlin—and dismisses socialist revolution as an impossibility. But it is the perspective of transforming the political sewer of the Democratic Party, infested by billionaires, spies and union bureaucrats, into a “party of the people” that is truly a fantasy.

As for the *Times* editors who solicited Rudd’s demoralized screed, they have more contemporary concerns. They fear the specter of social revolution, not 50 years ago, but today, when the working class around the world is beginning to break free of the old parties and union apparatuses that have suppressed the class struggle for nearly half a century.

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