Student activism is crucial for the health of Canadian society

DECONSTRUCTIONS

by Asaf Rashid

In 1967, world-renowned author and human rights advocate Noam Chomsky wrote an essay titled The Responsibility of Intellectuals. In it, he explains, "Intellectuals are in a position to expose the lies of governments, to analyze actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions. In the Western world, at least, they have the power that comes with political liberty, from access to information and freedom of expression. For a privileged minority, Western democracy provides the leisure, the facilities, and the training to seek the truth lying hidden behind the veil of distortion, misrepresentation, ideology and class interest, through which the events of current history are presented to us. The responsibility of intellectuals, then, is much deeper than... the 'responsibility of people', given the unique privileges that intellectuals enjoy."

Chomsky was referring to established academics, i.e. professors, who would qualify as "experts" on whatever subject they are teaching. His point about their responsibility is still valid today. But I would extend the responsibility, to be more adequately shared by the entire academic community, students included. I would add that the more experienced students, as well as established academics in general, should be in the best position to be able to effectively act upon the responsibility.

Since I am limited by space, I will only talk about the responsibility of students to be involved in social justice activism. Low levels of activism amongst the students towards social justice issues is a detriment to society overall. Decades ago, students were crucial in buffering the ranks of people who were raising awareness, marching on the streets, and participating in civil disobedience in order to further the causes of women's rights, racial equality and resistance to both militarism and nuclear weapons proliferation. This list of causes can continue. No doubt, the allowance by Canada for 50,000 Vietnam War Resisters from the U.S. to be granted asylum in Canada was partly influenced by the student activism towards the issue. Students, using their unique, "protected" position (described above by Chomsky), buffered all of these movements and the many more I failed to mention. There are numerous and more detailed examples of student-based social justice movements in the U.S. than in Canada. There is considerable evidence of how they helped move along the struggle for the recognition of rights of the oppressed. Groups included the far left Students for a Democratic Society (in Canada as well), the Congress on Racial Equality and the Free Speech Movement. I encourage readers to look up all of these and other related movements and uncover the details of their impacts.

Currently, student activism is far from where it used to be on Canadian campuses. I had a conversation over a year ago about this subject with Dan Weston, director of the Fredericton Anti-poverty Organization. He told me of how the student movement has seriously lost momentum compared to where it used to be when he was in it. In Fredericton, I have noticed that it is particularly weak, compared with other campuses, such as York (which I previously attended) and Concordia.

What are some of the reasons university students in Fredericton are not more involved? It's not that there aren't plenty of issues to engage in. New Brunswick has continually rising tuition, some of the worst protection for employees in the country (NB Employment Standards Act), the lowest levels of social assistance for a singe person ($264/month), a minimum wage of only $6.30 per hour, closing rural hospitals, pulp mills shutting down all over the province leaving communities economically stranded...

Personally, I think one of the barriers to more student activism is that the major bodies that represent students at UNB, the UNB Student Union and the Graduate Student Association (GSA, which I'm technically represented by) have not been sufficiently involved in mobilizing students to take action for the rights of the marginalized—both students and non-students. The representative bodies have the organizational resources that ordinary students do not, and I don't feel they have been properly used. I have been a graduate student at UNB now for almost three years and have been disappointed by what I have seen. I have also been very involved in social justice activism over the same time frame, so I feel I'm in a legitimate position to make this criticism. I am not putting any blame for the lack of student engagement on any one person or particular group of people amongst the representative bodies. I believe that the representative bodies have largely been constrained by structure. The UNB Student Union has an "apolitical" ideal written into their bylaws. This makes it difficult to take hard stances on issues. Under the umbrella organization they are a part of, the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations, member organizations stick to post-secondary education issues alone, avoiding issues that are problems for broader society as well. Their strategy is aimed at working with government to resolve student concerns alone. They also do not list mass mobilizations of students amongst their strategies for furthering their causes, despite the demonstrated effectiveness of this approach. Overall, these restrictions reduce the presence of students in society, placing them in a separate camps, invisible to the public eye. I think a change in direction, away from these structural barriers would be beneficial to students, at least for the sake of student activism. There are options.

I am not aware of the GSA being under any umbrella organization - I have looked - but grad students will soon have the opportunity to consider becoming part of one. From October 24-26, there will be a referendum for UNB grad students to decide whether or not they are interested in joining the Canadian Federation of Students (www.cfs-fcee.ca). Promotion of this referendum will begin in a serious fashion on October 16. It will be up to the students to decide which direction, if any, they want to go. I'll do my own research and decide myself. Expect more on this subject next week.

Union will suffer without Bruce

It is with great disappointment that I heard the UNB Student Union would not be renewing the contract for UNB's Director of Marketing and Programming, Bruce Devlin. For the last five years Bruce has made an outstanding effort to bring great entertainment to UNB and its students.

I have attended dozens of events organized by Bruce over the last few years and thousands of other students have benefited from his hard work and dedication to his job. Bruce is both passionate and professional in the work that he does and I cannot stress enough how much of a mistake it would be for the Student Union to let such a talented and dedicated individual slip away.

I urge the Student Union to look at other avenues for saving money and to not turn this job over to a new student every year. While more student involvement in the operation of the university might be desired, this is not the place to start.

Simply put, the executives of the Student Union will be making a huge mistake if they follow through with these plans.

Ben Conoley



Bruce Devlin

Writer disappointed by lack of Student Union deficit coverage in Bruns

Dear Editor,

Last week, there was an ad in The Brunswickan telling us, "Why Not Write About Stuff In The Brunswickan?" Today, I do not write to comment on something I read in the paper. Instead, I write to you about an article you failed to publish last week. I was astonished to find that you obviously thought this particular topic was not important to bring to the attention of students. The students of UNB deserved to know last week that the Student Union is in a deficit situation.

Your front page had bold headings and articles telling us about internet issues from the start of the year at St. Thomas, and a facelift for The Lord Beaverbrook Hotel. I am appalled that you thought these were the most important topics for the week, minimizing the news of an SU deficit. I'm not saying these articles did not deserve to be published or that they were not well written. When compared to the deficit, however, I think they bear less importance to the UNB student body. How could The Brunswickan think that "Student Union Deficit at $130,000" was not the better choice for last week's front page story?

I sat bewildered this morning, staring at the paper that lacked any news of the Union's deficit. I decided to take it upon myself to bring the topic to the attention of my peers, having no guarantee that the newest issue of the Bruns would contain the information. You chose not to publish it last week; I see no reason why you would do the same this week! Now that students do know, albeit a week too late, maybe you can give them all the facts, the inside scoop and maybe an interview with the SU President of the past and present. Please do not leave out the big issues for students at UNB; those are the stories to write.

I'd like to say, "please bring us the full story," but it seems that your paper is so misdirected that it doesn't see the need for any story at all.

Erin McCarthy

Marxist disappointed by anti-war / Jack Layton editorial cartoon in Bruns

I would like to declare my disappointment with the editorial cartoon presented in the September 28, 2005 issue of the Brunswickan. It appears to me that the message of the anti-imperialist war rally and march is lost upon the cartoonist, among other people.

The significance of the rally was not to have Jack Layton come and speak. Myself, and many other people could care less if Layton was scheduled for a "guest appearance" or not. Myself, and many other people are also NOT disappointed that Layton "failed" to make his guest appearance. The rally was not about him! It was not about hearing what he had to say about the issue of the rally.

Indeed, the issue of the rally, as far as is concerned by the Marxist Reading Group, was to point out how imperialist war is not about freedom and democracy, greed, or even specifically about oil. The "war on terror" (imperialist in nature) is not about ending terrorism, but about pacifying labour upsurges "at home." The excuse of the "war on terror" has been used systematically to quell labour demands throughout Canada, the United States and Britain, among many other countries.

Other issues that were raised throughout the rally and march is that peace is effectively impossible in a social system based upon antagonism, such as capitalism; women in "home" countries are pressed into labour for a lower wage than men would be in order to fill the labour gap; women and children are often "bystanders" in situations of war, but are also often some of the primary victims (for instance, rape as a weapon of war).

What the Marxist Reading Group wanted to present at the rally and march: there will always be war in a class society; a war of one class, a ruling class, subjugating an exploited class by some means or another. Thus the war to be waged is a class war against oppression and exploitation!

Neil Cole
Fredericton

Editor's Note: *The Deconstructions column by Asaf Rashid published with the editorial cartoon in question did not focus on the motivations behind the rally. It focused on the fact that Layton did not show up at the rally but was shaking hands at the Boyce Farmers' Market. The idea for the cartoon came from Asaf's article.*

www.unb.ca/bruns

Brunswickan staff meetings

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ATTENTION

UNB - Fredericton undergraduate students

Tentative December 2005 exam schedule

The tentative 2005 December exam schedule will be available by October 11, 2005 on the web from the unb homepage or at this url:
http://www.unb.ca/schedules/exam/

The tentative schedule is also posted on faculty bulletin boards. It is expected that the Final Exam Schedule will be available by October 21st, 2005. Students are reminded that they are expected to make themselves available for examinations until the last possible day of the examination period, ie December 21st, 2005. Therefore, travel arrangements should not be finalized until the final examination timetable has been released. Deferred exams will not be granted for reason of travel arrangements.