

## Sit In! A Tactical Analysis



(Tulane Sits-In, Spring 2000)

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On Friday afternoon, Jan.29 1999, about twenty Duke students marched into the lobby of their president's office where they would stay for 31 hours before winning a compromise agreement. Seven days later Georgetown students sat-in for 85 hours and three days later Madison students did 97 hours. These actions were widely covered in the media, put the student anti-sweatshop movement on the map, and were only the beginning of a new large progressive student movement. During the rest of the spring semester there were four more sit-ins, with Arizona students setting a new record at 225 hours. That spring there were a total of seven anti-sweatshop/student-labor sit-ins, the next spring there were 15.

While the student anti-sweatshop movement may have peaked in the spring of 2000, after many of the groups won many of their goals – this movement's rise can be explained to a significant degree on the use of sit-ins. The tactic is an old one, but it was new because many schools hadn't recently seen a sit-in nor had the media paid them as much attention since the Sixties. Unlike the sit-ins of the Sixties which often led to police fighting protesters and mass arrests, most of these sit-ins won their goals – without arrests. Their tactical strength came from being just confrontational enough to engage the imagination of students and the attention of the press, without giving administrators the excuse to do a harsh crackdown.

This essay is for campus activists. You've already got a campaign. Here are some reasons how a sit-in could help you win. Unfortunately, as I have not organized or participated in a sit-in (other than a short spontaneous one), I am not qualified to advise you on matters like scouting the place out, secrecy, supplies, and bathroom access. I would strongly recommend reading "When Campus Resists" (Hudson, etc, 1997) which is extremely hard to find, the account of the Tufts sit-in, the interviews done by Penn Students Against Sweatshops, and a leaflet by a Quebec student syndicalist organization.



(Columbia students occupy building #5, 1968)

## ANTI-SWEATSHOP AND STUDENT-LABOR SIT-INS FROM JANUARY 1999 TO APRIL 2000

Spring 1999		Spring 2000		
<u>Anti-Sweatshop</u>	<u>Student Labor</u>	<u>Anti-Sweatshop</u>	<u>Student-Labor</u>	<u>Multiple Goals</u>
Arizona	Fairfield	Iowa	Johns Hopkins	SUNY Albany
Duke		Kentucky	Ohio State	
Georgetown		Macalester	Pitzer	
Michigan		Michigan	Pomona	
UNC		Oregon	Wesleyan	
Wisconsin		Pennsylvania		
		Toronto		
		Tulane		
		Wisconsin		

Most of the following analysis is based on research (for my master's thesis) that I did on the anti-sweatshop/student labor sit-ins (mostly by United Students Against Sweatshops – USAS groups) during the springs of 1999 and 2000.

### **Defining “Sit-In”**

A sit-in is the most common form of high-risk/cost activism on campuses. A broad definition for sit-in would include any attempt by a group of people to occupy a space that would inconvenience the university administration (either by embarrassment or by reducing their ability to function) for a long period of time (days rather than hours). I restricted my analysis to sit-ins that involved students entering and attempting to stay in their administration building because the “shantytown” tactic, where students occupy a space outside and construct shelters, is significantly less confrontational. There were two very confrontational sit-ins that were not in my sample: Pomona College – where the students took total control of a building, and Pitzer College – where they did a partial building blockade.

In practice, students often tried to take a building or office by surprise. An average group of two dozen people would enter the president's office during the day, often during lunch (when it would be largely empty) or in the early morning. In general the students did not get into the personal office of the president, but sat in the lobby. In several cases they were removed by university security or unable to get in the office and occupied a hallway instead. Often the university hired security guards to supervise the participants.

## **Event Differences**

I initially assumed that sit-ins would be similar across campuses. However, after additional investigation, it became clear that there were significant differences between the events. At first it seemed that university administrations would not punish students; however, after Wisconsin arrested fifty-four students in March 2000, followed by additional arrests at SUNY Albany, Kentucky, and Iowa, the perceived level of risk increased. As the movement progressed and won initial victories, USAS groups increased their demands. They went from demanding codes of conduct in 1998/1999 to asking universities to join the WRC and leave the Fair Labor Association in 1999/2000. During this period, with increased demands and schools that were less accommodating, it took students longer to achieve victory. In my sample, sit-in length ranged from eight hours to over ten days<sup>1</sup>.

The sit-ins had varying levels of accessibility to the public. Some sit-ins were planned in secret and carried out by an activist core group, whereas in other sit-ins people were free to come and go. Factors that influenced this included the length of the sit-in (longer sit-ins generally had more chances for people to join), the attitude of the administration and security toward letting people join, and the accessibility of the space that was occupied.

Loosely defined participation ranged from thirteen people (Pennsylvania) to the over three hundred people that signed-in visiting Arizona's sit-in, to an estimated 1000-1500 who attended teach-ins at Iowa. Most sit-ins maintained a constant presence of ten to thirty people.

## **Event Accounts**

Duke Students Against Sweatshops was one of the first groups to start working on this issue. After almost two years of negotiating, the students decided that their administration needed encouragement. At 1pm on Friday January 29, 1999, they sat in the president's lobby. They stayed for thirty-one hours. Their administrators treated them well, never making any threats. One administrator remained in the building (even playing a board game with the students) and a security officer was stationed nearby. The students won an agreement, making Duke the first university to agree to full public disclosure of factory locations. It was only a modest victory, as they failed in their demand of preventing the university from signing on to the weak Collegiate Licensing Company's (CLC) code of conduct, but it was the first and its speed was impressive.

Michigan student activists had only been organizing against sweatshops since August 1998. However, after successes at Duke, Georgetown, and Wisconsin, and after the expiration of their group's deadline, Students Organizing for Labor and Economic Equality (SOLE) sat in. Thirty students occupied the president's lobby from March 17-19, 1999. Their university president publicly welcomed their presence and concern, and did not threaten them. The group achieved success as they won code of conduct language for full public disclosure, women's rights, and a living wage.

UNC students had been focussing on Nike since the fall of 1997 and later expanded their focus to include sweatshops. After their university failed to implement disclosure and a living wage in its February 1999 code of conduct, Students for Economic Justice sat in the administration building from April 20-23, 1999. Their sit-in was non-confrontational and participants were free to come and go. Most sit-ins benefited from technology (laptops and cellular telephones), but UNC even provided live coverage of their sit-in on a web camera. They won their demands as the chancellor agreed to disclosure, a living wage, and independent monitoring.

At the University of Arizona, students first released a critical report about their university's responsibility for sweatshops in February. Next, the group had a small rally against the CLC code in March, sitting in on an upper floor of their administration building on April 21, 1999. They stayed for 225 hours and won full disclosure, a living wage, women's rights, and half the seats on a newly formed taskforce.

After their university failed to join the WRC and leave the FLA by their Feb. 1, 2000 deadline, thirteen Pennsylvania Students Against Sweatshops members launched the spring 2000 wave by sitting in on Feb. 8, 2001. At times, they antagonized their president by increasing the noise level inside the administration building. They faced some difficulty coming and going from the sit-in, but never a serious threat of discipline. On Feb. 14, the group launched a two-day fast, with supporters joining in from sixty

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<sup>1</sup> Sit-in lengths in hours: Arizona – 225, Duke – 30, Kentucky – 8, Iowa – 129, Michigan – 51, Pennsylvania – 196, Tulane – 246, and UNC – 72.

schools. By the next day, the university had agreed to half their demands, becoming the first school to pull out of the FLA. It created a committee with student activist representation to decide the university's final relationship to the FLA and WRC.

Tulane Students Against Sweatshops organized a traditionally conservative campus student body and sat in on March 29, 2000. Coming after the arrests at Wisconsin, Tulane students faced the possibility of arrest on their first night when they remained in an administrative building after its midnight closing time. However, 220 students rallied outside in support and the university police allowed them to stay. After several days of staying in the building overnight with security taking down their names, and with the administration refusing to negotiate until they left the building at night, they decided to camp out when the building was closed. The university later fined each student who had stayed in the building overnight sixty-eight dollars. After 246 hours, students agreed to a compromise where Tulane would temporarily leave both the FLA and the WRC, and the university would put the issue to a student referendum.

On April 4, the anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., University of Kentucky activists rallied 200 people, attended a trustees meeting, and then eighteen students locked down in the administration building. Their act was met with police repression. The students dropped their major demands of leaving the FLA and joining the WRC, only asking to hold a public forum with the president. But twelve of them were still arrested at 1:45am. They ended up with a meeting with administrators below the level of the president, and achieved the least amount of success of any of the sit-ins.

In March 2000, the University of Iowa's Human Rights committee, which had been delegated the responsibility for investigating the issue by the president, recommended that the university leave the FLA, "actively explore" joining the WRC, and enact a strict code of conduct. The university agreed to consider the WRC, and then after students sat in on April 4 it solidified its commitment. Students remained to protest Iowa's membership in the FLA until April 8, when twenty police ended the sit-in by telling protestors that they were violating the fire code and had to leave. The police arrested five students who refused to leave, and another twenty students left willingly. The arrested students were later fined \$200 for criminal trespass.

The sit-in tactic emerged out of the movement's need to target university administrations. It was diffused through email, telephone calls, conferences, and the media. The sit-ins were the product of long campaigns and considerable strategic planning. While the dimensions of risk and cost differed at each school, they all shared at least a small level of each. Due to the large number of anti-sweatshop sit-ins on college campuses, this is a good case study to analyze participation in high-risk/cost activism.

### **Developing a Theory of High-Risk/Cost Recruitment**

What can these eight cases teach us about recruiting participants for student sit-ins? This question is important because its answers are also valid for other high-risk/cost actions. While high-risk/cost actions find their strength in depth, they need breadth as well to maximize their power. Participants must do something significant enough to exert considerable pressure on their target, and there must be enough participants for the action to succeed.

An activist group can plan a sit-in to maximize participation, although it may also encounter externally imposed barriers to doing this. At first, a group can build a wide base of support for its issue before sitting in. For one or two years it can try to meet with administrators, collect signatures, invite speakers, show videos, write letters, and hold rallies. These steps are necessary, because even if the campaign starts with a majority of student support, far fewer students will support a sit-in. Thus, most campuses had large educational campaigns before their sit-in, even including canvasses of entire student bodies (Macalester and Harvard). By these activities, local groups created a critical mass of activists with strong movement ties that could organize a sit-in. This preparation was critical to success, but ignored by the media and the student movement; because it lacked the excitement of direct action. The sit-ins were only organized when a local campaign had reached a critical level of momentum, strategically analyzed its position, and believed that it could win in a showdown with its administration. When it came time to sit-in, over a third of the participants spent over ten hours in planning the event. It was experienced group members (activists) who started the sit-ins. While one can engage in high-risk/cost actions without significant preparation (ex. a riot), these cases show that the success rate is greater if preparation is done, in terms of education and planning.

Second, a group can plan its action to disrupt university operations as much as possible without inviting rapid repression that would end or dramatically reduce chances for participation. This allows the group to use the time during which the administration hesitates to intervene to build its support and make repressive intervention less likely. For a sit-in, one would want to organize an event that was just confrontational enough to merit being called a sit-in and to exert pressure as one. Student groups realized this, and the vast majority of student sit-ins occupied a lobby or hallway instead of a president's actual office. These events were a significant step below taking over an office or a building, or doing a building blockade – all of which would have invited repression. While my results show that expectations of threats of risk increased participation, I suspect that at a very high level of risk (e.g. the building takeover level) participation would drop.

Having the action last for several days is essential for obtaining mass support. The movement will grow as the sit-in receives widespread media coverage, the university fails to intervene, and supporters do outreach. Peripheral supporters who lacked ties to the group and who didn't self-identify as activists will join the sit-in once it seems safer to participate and that the campaign is on the threshold of success. Thus, the student anti-sweatshop sit-ins gained momentum, building the campus movement's power often until the last day of the sit-in. While one might expect that eventually a sit-in would lose support, I measured growing participation even after five or more days of duration. In fact the sit-in momentum was quadratic (it looked like a  $y=x^2$  graph). After several days of gaining momentum, given favorable local conditions a local group might do well by escalating its tactics. For instance, a group could move the sit-in from a hallway or lounge to an office, convert a sit-in into an occupation that physically bars university employees, or launch an additional sit-in or takeover with another target.

Third, a group can plan the action to accommodate participation at different levels of cost and risk. This will ensure that low-risk and low-cost tasks are done and facilitate recruitment into higher levels of participation. In the student anti-sweatshop movement, sit-ins allowed for direct participation as well as less risky and costly actions. This distinction of roles is not always easy, as the actions of high-risk/cost activists can increase the cost or risk for everyone else, or they can alienate them by using radical tactics. This difficulty is clear from the conflict in the anti-globalization movement over whether to support a "diversity of tactics." For instance, the high-risk actions of the Black Bloc, especially property destruction, alienate many of the movement's supporters and increase the likelihood that the police will use tear gas or mass arrests against all of the demonstrators. This problem is less significant in situations like student sit-ins, where the action is under the control of one organization. This group can choose to control the range of tactics, whereas with the large anti-globalization demonstrations this is impossible. Examining whether and how groups manage to create roles at different levels of participation (in terms of risk and cost) allows for a better understanding of social movement mobilization and strength.

Fourth, while not necessarily under the group's control, the physical accessibility of the sit-in is critical for increasing participation and socializing low-risk/cost activists into greater involvement. The group can try to choose a space that the university security will not seal, but the final decision rests with the university administration because most spaces worth occupying can be sealed. Sit-ins where students are free to come and go allow for participants to attend classes, work jobs, and take breaks to maintain their sanity (see Hudson et al. [1997] for a case of siege mentality at Guelph). In addition, accessible sit-ins allowed hundreds of students to visit and get a taste of what the action is like. Group decisions on matters such as choosing which space to sit-in shape participation in social movements.

An external factor that can limit participation is the tactical need for secrecy during planning so that police do not preempt the action. This initially restricts participation to people in the activist group's network. However, this restriction can be overcome if the sit-in is accessible and lasts longer than a day. Another possibility for a short sit-in is to organize the logistics with a core group, and then invite people to participate immediately before it starts. This could be done at a rally (e.g. Columbia in 1986), by email, or via telephone.

An additional external factor that determines the rate of participation is the strength of opposition of the target, because this affects the level of risk and length of the sit-in. Some university administrations will tolerate sit-ins and even express support for the participant's goals (Michigan), while others will quickly

use repression (Kentucky).

In summary, students are more fluid in their willingness to participate than one might expect. For instance, of the thirty-four people in my sample who had not protested in the past two years, thirteen sat in and ten did support. As these cases show, an innovative action can generate enthusiasm causing initial involvement. The intensity of the action leads to a rapid development of activist identity and ties, potentially leading to a high level of participation in the high-risk/cost action. Other participants were not swept away by this process, but rather they were recruited due to their leftist political views that had led to prior ties with local activists who organized the sit-ins. In addition to these factors, student participation was influenced by the actions of their group and of the university administration.

### **Spontaneous Sit-Ins**

Of course a lot of sit-ins are spontaneous. Often a sit-in is sparked by a racist, sexist, heterosexist (or otherwise oppressive) incident (cartoons, posters, harassment, etc).

On a Friday afternoon on February 5, 1999, Notre Dame students were wrapping up our Week of Action. We'd been campaigning for a year to get sexual orientation in our nondiscrimination clause, won several university votes, got national press, and now on the third day of our fast/hunger-strike (with over a hundred participants at various levels of fasting) it was up to the Board of Trustees to make their decision.

I came from class to the student union building. We had lost. The decision had been made in December and kept secret. I turned to a fellow organizer and, partially because I'd recently subscribed to the USAS email list, asked him if we should sit-in? He said sure. We phoned our supporters, held an impromptu meeting to discuss whether to take action, and within two hours we were sitting-in the lobby of the administration building.

We stayed for several hours. It was amazing that the Administration didn't kick us out, because they have a rule that says you need to register demonstrations (even if one person is passing out a leaflet – they need to register) and the person who enforced the rule walked by the sit-in a couple times. They didn't even tell us that we should leave, only that we should be sure not to block the door. We spent our time in discussion. Several people wanted to organize a student strike, and I, who was typically the most supportive of radical forms of action of any student on campus, had to take the moderate position that we didn't have anywhere near the support we'd need. The faculty senate president visited us and was very mad at the decision. We had a local TV reporter with camera show up. The university police had a couple people wandering around. I think just about when they were going to tell us we had to leave they didn't because they saw that we decided to leave on our own. We ended the sit-in because the President was in London, England (where the trustees were meeting), we were tired from having killed ourselves organizing the week of action, and we wanted to eat.

It didn't win us anything. But in my mind it still goes down as a historic challenge to the university's rules on demonstrations, and was a good place to analyze how our campaign had gone. What you might want to learn from this, is that spontaneity can work in circumstances of abnormal evil (the Berkeley free speech sit-in in the Sixties is a good example of this), however you shouldn't try it if your organizers are exhausted (fasting and sitting-in is a bad idea) and you lack the ability to mobilize a large number of supporters.

Two years later, we were trying to get Notre Dame to join the Worker Rights Consortium. The committee had voted on a recommendation to our president, but the committee members refused to tell us what it was! So I tried to convince my group to do a sit-in, because I thought we had lost the vote and were better off sitting-in before the president made a public statement on the issue – so he wouldn't have to reverse himself. But it was before spring break (not a good time to sit-in due to exams), so we waited. This turned out for the best, because we had fortunately won the vote. I still haven't managed to participate in a "real" (aka lengthy and organized) sit-in, and I'd really like to. If you are organizing one – email me and I might come.

## Resources

Association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante. "L'ABC D'Une Occupation."  
<http://www.campusactivism.org/displayresource-132.htm>

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Hudson, Helen and Tom Keefer, Lana Rabkin, and Andrew Thompson, Eds. 1997. "When Campus Resists: The Politics of Space, Power, and the Culture of Resistance in the Guelph Occupation Movement." Guelph, Canada: Occupation Press.

Kreider, Aaron. Mobilizing Supporters to Sit-In: High Cost and High Risk Activism in the Student Anti-Sweatshop Movement. Unpublished master's thesis. 2003.  
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"Occupation." A 45 min video on the Harvard Living Wage campaign and sit-in. 2002.  
<http://www.enmassefilms.org/occupation.htm>

Penn Students Against Sweatshops. "Interviews with students who conducted sit-ins in the Spring of 1999." 2000. <http://www.campusactivism.org/uploads/sitin-interviews.htm>.