

Organizing Against Empire: Struggles over the Militarization of CUNY

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"CUNY Must Not Be a War College." Photo credit: Julieta Salgado

The City University of New York (CUNY) is under attack. Over the past academic year, students, faculty, staff, and communities have organized against efforts by the CUNY administration and the US military to increasingly privatize and militarize the university. CUNY is the nation's largest public urban university with half a million students and tens of thousands of academic workers. Its student population is mostly women (57%) and mostly people of color (75%), many of whom are working class, multilingual, from immigrant families, and the first in their family to attend college. As such it has also drawn the attention of reformers who would like to use the sprawling public university system as a testing grounds for militarizing public higher education. The controversial appointment of general David Petraeus to teach at CUNY's Macaulay Honors College, the return of the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) to undergraduate campuses, and the intensification of policing and surveillance by CUNY are the most visible symptoms of this militarizing trend.

These recent policy developments uncannily follow steps outlined by the neoconservative think tank American Enterprise Institute in their 2011 report, “Underserved: A Case Study of ROTC in New York City.” The report calls for a return of ROTC to large urban public universities in order to diversify the military’s officer class. It also recommends the appointment of “warrior scholars,” naming David Petraeus as an ideal candidate to capture the hearts and minds of young potential recruits and to improve the military’s public image. In addition, AEI argues that CUNY’s diverse population might offer the military strategic advantages as it recruits educated immigrant students from countries where the United States is currently undertaking operations. Of course, the flip side of this latter point is that the large population of students from countries where the U.S. maintains its 1000+ foreign military bases may not be predisposed to welcome the arrival of the military on their college campuses. These factors have made CUNY a potential dream recruitment site for the military and simultaneously its worst anti-imperialist nightmare. As ROTC seduces some with scholarships and “job opportunities,” it also triggers the ire of activists, disaffected veterans, immigrant communities, and survivors of US imperialism. This is the complex and contradictory terrain upon which the militarization of our university now unfolds.

In this article we begin from the premise that there is intimate link between militarization and neoliberal restructuring at public universities. As public universities are subject to unpopular corporate-style restructurings, tuition hikes, and flexibilization of their academic labor force, they are also increasing their security budgets to deal with unrest and protests against these changes. In this sense, security, repression, and militarization go hand in hand with neoliberalism. In turn, neoliberal policies have paved the way for the return of the US military to college campuses. As funding for public universities is slashed, schools become more dependent on private donations and rising tuitions. As tenured professors are replaced with precarious underpaid and overworked adjuncts, so too is the power over university governance concentrated in the hands of overpaid bureaucrats and unaccountable board members. The trend towards a corporate model of public university governance has yielded a small elite class who sees great opportunities in the “funding streams” proffered by the US military and private donors. It is these unaccountable bureaucrats who, at CUNY, have helped facilitate the project to reintroduce ROTC, hire David Petraeus, and invite neoconservative donors to open research centers at CUNY.

We use the term militarization to mean (1) the particular incursion of the US military into the City University of New York, most visibly seen through the return of ROTC and the appointment of David Petraeus. By militarization we also mean (2) the general trend towards heightened security and surveillance on campus, the integration of campus security with police departments, and the intensified weaponization of security and police forces, which is also taking place at a broader societal level. At CUNY these types of militarization have taken various forms: increased security budgets, collusion with NYPD spying on Muslim students, academic centers funded by neoconservative donors, intimidation of student activists, and attacks against organizing spaces.

Over the past academic year (2013-2014), a movement against these forms of militarization has emerged. While this militarization has been openly encouraged and abetted from the top by the CUNY

administration and Board of Trustees, it has been vigorously opposed from below. As former CUNY Chancellor Matthew Goldstein worked to broker a deal to bring the fallen general to teach at CUNY, student activists worked harder to stage protests and actions building public opinion against his appointment. Similarly, ROTC recruitment officers were welcomed by college administrators and some faculty members as eagerly as they were hounded and shamed by students, faculty, staff, alumni, and community activists, who eventually triumphed in barring ROTC from two campuses. What follows is a chronicle of these struggles, an assessment of the victories and defeats of the past academic year, and an analysis of the frictions between militarization of the public university, neoliberal restructuring, and popular resistance.

I. Protesting Petraeus

In April 2013, David Petraeus—former head of the Central Intelligence Agency, four-star General who headed the coalition forces during the Iraq War, and co-author of the U.S. Army Counter-Insurgency Field Manual—was appointed an adjunct professorship position at Macaulay Honors College at CUNY. Petraeus’s appointment joined a trend of high-level security officials moving into academic positions upon leaving their government jobs (or vice versa).^[1] Initial news articles protested Petraeus’ pay as emblematic of blatant wage discrepancies at CUNY: as a visiting adjunct professor he was to be paid \$200,000 per year, while adjuncts normally make less than \$3,000 per course. This prompted such outrage that eventually Petraeus’ salary was reduced to the nominal sum of \$1, although he still received an undisclosed supplementary amount from a private donor.

However, this pay reduction did not quiet the criticism of his appointment, as the University administration hoped it would. By the start of Fall 2013, an Ad-hoc Committee Against the Militarization of CUNY, made up of students and faculty from a variety of CUNY campuses, emerged to contest his appointment with a semester-long campaign of direct actions that included protesting in front of his class each week and chanting such things as: “CUNY will not be a war college.” Students also followed Petraeus to and from his lecture every week in a well-orchestrated “bird-dog” tactic. One of these occurrences received international press when activists disseminated video footage of a crowd of students verbally heckling and following Petraeus, calling him a “war criminal,” as he walks alone on a public sidewalk. In addition to these confrontational tactics the Free University-NYC held “counter-classes” near Macaulay and Baruch Colleges, offering anti-imperialist learning alternatives to the pro-empire content being propagated inside Petraeus’ classroom. At these events students, faculty and staff came together to build a collective analysis of the militarization taking place in their University.

In response to the weekly outrage outside Petraeus’ class, the CUNY administration immediately condemned the protesters, citing the need to defend Petraeus’ “academic freedom.” Meanwhile the recurrent Monday protests quickly led to the brutal arrest of six students on September 17, 2013.^[2] The brutality of these arrests (in a video of this incident CUNY student Luis Henriquez is seen being punched several times in the ribs while being handcuffed) prompted a solidarity letter written by CUNY students and signed by over 500 students and faculty calling on the resignation of Petraeus.

Despite prominent international media attention, both this letter and the police brutality that prompted it were met with silence by the CUNY administration.

Activists also took aim at the propagandistic content of Petraeus' class. The imperialist message of the course was already clear in its title, "The Coming (North) American Decade(s)." Its syllabus included fracking industry-sponsored articles, funded and written by oil companies, which fell well below the criteria for academic scholarship. The course description itself eerily overlapped with Petraeus' job description at the private equity firm Kohlberg, Kravis and Roberts (KKR), where he works as a consultant. Indeed, KKR has billions of dollars invested in topics and industries about which Petraeus taught. Protesters highlighted these connections and denounced the blatant commercial interests in course materials as well as the university administration's cynical use of "academic freedom" as a protective screen. However, despite the widespread anger and ongoing demonstrations over Petraeus' appointment, Macaulay Honors College announced in April 2014 that Petraeus would remain another academic year to teach the same course.

II. Resisting ROTC

Over forty years ago, the CUNY student movement forced the ROTC off of its campuses through sit-ins, strikes, and even building fires. In 2012, ROTC suddenly made a return to CUNY without consulting most faculty and student governance bodies. Nationwide, ROTC programs exist in 489 colleges and universities, with further access to 2,469 more colleges through cross-registration agreements, as a college-to-military pipeline for procuring U.S. military officers. In the process, ROTC radically alters campus life to include uniformed students' drill formations, and ROTC professors' hiring and curricular decisions that are unaccountable to departmental governance procedures. ROTC recruiters often target low-income and working class US citizens aged 17-27, who must upon graduation serve in the military for up to ten years (or pay the money back), offering scholarships based on "merit," not financial need.^[3] That recruiters themselves refer to campuses as "hunting grounds" is emblematic of the predatory methods used by ROTC to pressure disadvantaged students into military service. Despite this, in 2012 the CUNY administration welcomed the ROTC program to York College and in 2013 to City College and Medgar Evers College.

ROTC's return has been opposed by many across CUNY, some even recalling when it was last jettisoned from the university. In response a September 2013 town hall at the College of Staten Island gathered people from across CUNY to hear anti-war veterans and audience members debate pro-ROTC speakers. This event led to the successful resistance of the program's arrival there and served as a model for a mid-February 2014 town hall at Medgar Evers College (MEC). This town hall was strategically timed to occur before a vote by the college's highest governing body, which subsequently decided by majority to remove ROTC from its campus. The removal of ROTC from Medgar Evers College marked a huge success for the anti-militarization movement, meanwhile these campaigns and their town hall style political education events will provide a template for ongoing organizing against ROTC at City College and York College in the coming years.

During this period, a newly formed committee against militarization in the Professional Staff Congress

(PSC-CUNY) union developed a solidarity network to coordinate these town halls and governance voting strategies. The committee also submitted a FOIL request on exchanges between the CUNY administration, the US military, and the American Enterprise Institute to ascertain how intimately the military industrial complex funds and colludes with people in the university. Notably, the committee's resolution to oppose ROTC at CUNY was roundly passed in May 2014 by the union's executive council and delegate assembly. In effect, this now sets the stage for university-wide faculty and staff actions against the US military's presence at CUNY, which can in turn further politicize current contract negotiations.

These are only some of the experiential lessons in organizing against ROTC recruitment that we take from this past year at CUNY. Through political education and diverse coalitions, our efforts successfully thwarted ROTC's ambitions at two campuses. We believe that ROTC can be pushed (back) out of CUNY entirely, but only if the university's various communities can widely stand together against militarism. We must continue to build wide democratic support for anti-militarization campaigns, which in part implies working against the tendency towards a student activism model of small self-selecting groups proclaiming actions on behalf of everyone else.

III. Intensified Policing and Surveillance amidst Movement Successes and Setbacks

A wider view of this academic year's organizing shows that when early Fall 2013 actions against Petraeus and ROTC picked up momentum, the CUNY administration responded with a series of repressive blows and surveillance efforts that disoriented and redirected our collective focus to defend activists and movement spaces. By Spring 2014, as some anti-militarization campaigns stalled, others picked up steam or formed powerful new bridges.

On October 20, the Guillermo Morales/Assata Shakur Center was seized by the campus police at City College in Harlem. This educational organizing space—won through a 1989 CUNY student strike against proposed tuition increases that had served as an activism resources hub for over 20 student clubs and community organizations—was a crucial space for students and community members who planned the Petraeus protests. Overnight, CUNY administrators and security dismantled the community center, confiscated personal property, and painted over its iconic stenciled door (a pencil-holding fist), swiftly converting the space into a low-resourced, staff-run career center annex. In response, furious students and community members carried out an ongoing campaign and legal case to retrieve their belongings and reclaim the space. This activity received national media attention and solidarity statements from various social justice organizations, but was ultimately unsuccessful in returning the space to students. The year of 2013 was a benchmark for militarization at City College, which in May also renamed its entire division of Social Sciences as “The Colin L. Powell School of Civic and Global Leadership.” The opening of Colin Powell School and the closing of the Morales/Shakur Center are emblematic of current transformations at CUNY. The loss of Morales/Shakur was also by far the largest blow that the CUNY movement suffered this year.

The collusion between CUNY security and the NYPD continues to be a violent brew, as manifested in the beating of several CUNY activists at Petraeus protests, and in disturbing irregularities around the

suspensions and arrests of student leaders and alumni. In late October, Revolutionary Student Coordinating Committee (RSCC) activists Khalil Vasquez and Tafadar Sourov were first suspended from City College, and then ordered by the New York City District Attorney's office to turn themselves in to spend a night in jail for attempting to incite a riot on campus. Before the university's own disciplinary procedures had run their course, CUNY security recommended that these activists be arrested by the NYPD for acts they had allegedly committed one month prior. This unprecedented act of intimidation upon these students shows new forms of repressive collusion being practiced at CUNY.

The CUNY Board of Trustees also briefly proposed, and then quietly retracted, a "Policy on Expressive Conduct," aimed at more broadly stifling free expression across the university. This policy would have imposed a rule requiring students to receive advance permission from CUNY security to hold organizing meetings, public assemblies, or even to distribute flyers and other informational materials.^[4] However activists quickly mobilized thousands of signatures and fomented a universal outrage from teachers and students across the university, forcing the Board of Trustees to retreat and retract their proposal. This struggle was emblematic of how the administration is attempting to silence dissent, as well as how we can organize against these attempts with broad alliances of students, faculty, staff, and community participants.

Internally the CUNY student movement also faced severe challenges around coalition-building, organizing styles, and political disagreements. All too often, factionalism and vanguardist machismo-ridden styles of organizing disrupted attempts at wider CUNY movement work. This is perhaps captured most poignantly by the fate of the Revolutionary Student Coordinating Committee (RSCC), a Maoist students of color group on several CUNY campuses who conducted a series of powerful early Fall 2013 actions. However, after being repressed by CUNY and NYPD forces and gaining considerable sympathetic attention, RSCC quickly alienated their allies, the broader public, and some of their own members through sexism, self-aggrandizing ideological sermons, zealous public denunciations of their would-be allies at broader coalition meetings, and petulant in-fighting. By the end of the Fall 2013 semester, this bright flame had been rapidly extinguished, having caused some notable damage along the way, and the group has yet to recover as a visibly impactful part of the CUNY movement.

IV: International Links: Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions

After a volatile Fall 2013 semester left many uncertain of future possibilities, in Spring 2014, some crucial new developments emerged in opposing the tide of CUNY militarization. Namely, several of these aforementioned campaigns and projects linked up with the international Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement that is proliferating across U.S. universities opposing Israeli apartheid. Inspired by the successes of academic boycotts by the Association for Asian American Studies and the American Studies Association, and divestments around the University of California system, a range of Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) chapters around CUNY held regular informational events, speaking tours, and visible actions during Israeli Apartheid Week. In addition CUNY Graduate Center students held dialogues that critiqued apolitical discourses of academic freedom, instead calling for

academic solidarity and anti-imperialism to link our contingent work and freedoms with those of students, teachers, and staff living under Israeli occupation.

In one of the most notable Spring BDS events, Brooklyn College's SJP chapter welcomed Ali Abunimah to discuss his book *The Battle for Justice in Palestine*, which was widely attended despite a few vocal Zionist student government opponents.^[5] The push for organizing around BDS is one crucial way that the CUNY movement is making international links with global struggles against militarism. In the tradition of activists like Assata Shakur (briefly a CUNY student herself), who interwove campus organizing alongside Third World struggles, the CUNY movement today opposes militarization on our campuses as part of global struggles of oppressed peoples. As we actively oppose the current U.S. government-funded and Israeli government-conducted mass carnage inflicted on the people of Gaza, many are redoubling BDS and related Palestine solidarity efforts at our CUNY campuses as integral to these struggles.

Refusing to Conclude

CUNY is a social movement riddle. With the dozens of radical groups which appear, vanish, flourish, shrink, collaborate, usurp, stabilize, antagonize, inspire, and dishearten within the daily upheavals of university life, the question of political organization has perplexed students, faculty, staff, and community members long since the fire last time. Organizing the vast and dispersed array of people affected by militarized classrooms, the lure of ROTC recruiters, racial profiling and surveillance, and intense financial vulnerability has proved a major challenge in the 2013-2014 wave of dissent. Learning from both our successes and defeats this year will provide an important stepping-stone for building a wider movement. With creatively sustained mass activities, a CUNY movement against empire can potentially dissuade other universities from accepting their own marching orders.

In order to contest militarization at CUNY, we find ourselves grasping for new ways to define and articulate being "militant." As an antidote to some of the disorganizing tendencies we faced this past year, we seek to develop humanizing creative experimentation, encourage diverse solidarities, and develop urban decolonizing strategies that don't refashion the macho mystique of armed struggle. We must develop broad-based coalitions led by working-class people of color at CUNY, political education, and "militant" anti-imperialist efforts without reproducing the hierarchical, masculinist and heterosexist, and tokenizing practices of the U.S. military. Ousting the U.S. military from one of its most valuable university targets requires a patient radical vision beyond one protest, one communiqué, one revolutionary tradition, one school, one semester, one year, perhaps even one decade. As former CUNY educator Toni Cade Bambara wrote in 1970, during the last major series of our university's transformations:

Instant coffee is the hallmark of current rhetoric. But we do have time. We'd better take the time to fashion revolutionary selves, revolutionary lives, revolutionary relationships.

Mouths don't win the war. It don't even win the people. Neither does haste, urgency, and stretch-out-now insistence. Not all speed is movement.

It is with these words in mind that we look to the future of confronting empire at CUNY.

References and Footnotes

1. Other examples include Homeland Security chief Janet Napolitano's Fall 2013 appointment to presidency of the University of California system; and Condoleeza Rice's 2000 appointment from Stanford University Provost to National Security Advisor under George W. Bush, and subsequent return to Stanford.
2. These students were charged with multiple offences including disorderly conduct, incitement to riot, resisting arrest, and the obstruction of governmental administration.
3. Recruitment begins even younger. As Ann Jones reports, "Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marine JROTC units now flourish in 3,402 high schools nationwide—65% of them in the South—with a total enrollment of 557,129 kids." (http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/175784/tomgram/%3A_ann_jones_suffer_the_children). The American Enterprise Institute report also states that in New York City alone, "Francis Lewis High School in Queens, New York City's second-largest high school, hosted the largest JROTC program in the country in 2009, with nearly seven hundred cadets... At Xavier High School in Manhattan, over one-third of the student body is enrolled in JROTC." (<http://www.aei.org/papers/society-and-culture/underserved-a-case-study-of-rotc-in-new-york-city/>)
4. The BoT claimed that such a policy was initially urged by CUNY faculty to establish guidelines for campus dissent. In fact, this faculty demand was originally made as a gesture of solidarity with dissent after a November 2011 incident at Baruch College, in which CUNY police and NYPD attacked students, faculty, staff, and community members peacefully trying to enter a public hearing on a five-year tuition increase, which resulted in dozens being injured and 15 arrested.
5. At a January 2013 Brooklyn College SJP event featuring Judith Butler and Omar Barghouti, organizers also faced attacks by Zionist student groups and several prominent City Council members who sought to cancel the event. These Council members leveraged their political power to threaten defunding the entire college. While they were ultimately ineffective and the event gathered a packed supportive house, this chain of events transformed the political climate and contributed to SJP's wider recognized presence at CUNY and in the city.