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Keepin’ It Real
Young People Organize for True Juvenile “Justice”

RONA FERNANDEZ

I took the red pill,” says Emil Dupont with a quiet laugh when asked why he’s a youth organizer. Dupont is a 17-year-old member of Let’s Get Free in Oakland, California. He is referring to the film “The Matrix,” in which Keanu Reeves’ character gets to choose between an easy life of ignorant bliss (the blue pill) and a difficult life of truth and struggle (the red pill). “I’ve been a victim of the system and now I see the truth and I want to do something about it,” he explains.

Historically, the Bay Area has been a major center for social change movements. But the Bay Area is also home to a vibrant youth movement that spans a range of issues and organizing models. Young people have always been at the forefront of struggles for justice; in recent years Bay Area youth organizations in particular have won key victories as well as helped shape public discourse on juvenile justice, ethnic studies and education issues.

Why Are Youth Organizing?

Emil is just one young person working hard for justice in a society where people like him — working class youth of color living in urban areas — are usually ignored, discounted or even criminalized. He has just completed the Summer School program of the School of Unity and Liberation (SOUL), which combines political education and organizer training to develop skilled young organizers. He plans to continue organizing with Let’s Get Free, an organization of young people that fights police brutality and the criminalization of youth.

Some adults are shocked to meet youth who can articulate a well-thought-out political analysis or who are doing positive work in their community. But the truth is, like any other oppressed community, youth organize because they are directly, often devastatingly, impacted by public policies over which they have little control.

“Young people suffer the most marginalization and oppression in our country,” says Ntanya Lee of Youth Making a Change (YMAG), the youth organizing program of Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth in San Francisco. “They should be getting trained to have the power to govern society.” YMAG is a group of fifteen high-school-age youth, trained and supported by adult staff, that organizes to bring youth voices to public policy decisions.

“Most youth we talk to, even before we
juvenile justice has grown in response to a frightening rise in incarceration rates. This is part of a national movement against the prison industrial complex.

**Proposition 21 and the Blossoming of a Movement**

In the mid-to-late 1990s, a slew of right-wing initiatives hit California—from the anti-immigrant Proposition 187 and the tough-on-crime Proposition 184, to the anti-affirmative action Proposition 209. In response, a wave of progressive organizing took place that was largely led by people in their teens and twenties, mostly young people of color who were directly impacted by these issues. For example, the Student Empowerment Project (now known as Olin) organized walkouts of thousands of mostly Latino/a youth. Other groups such as YMAC, the Kids First Coalition, Californians for Justice, SOUL, Third Eye Movement and others did important organizing and training work to build the leadership skills and organizing experience of young people of color in particular.

When Proposition 21—the draconian juvenile “justice” initiative which sought to place youth in adult courts and prisons, and to redefine a “gang” as three youth with certain affiliations—hit the March 2000 ballot, these young organizers were ready to take on the fight. And they had a solid network of youth groups and community allies to carry out a real organizing campaign.

The tactics that these young activists used took old direct action stand-bys like rallies and sit-ins and added a hip-hop flavor. For example, at one protest several hundred young people marched silently into the swanky San Francisco Hilton Hotel (the chain was a funder of the Yes on 21 campaign), fists held high, for a sit-in complete with spoken word, music and hip-hop-influenced chants. This display of determination and discipline made a huge impact in the media by portraying young people not as dangerous criminals, but as passionate activists willing to put their bodies on the line for an issue they felt strongly about.

Youth Force Coalition, a Bay Area coalition of twenty-five youth groups struggling against the prison industrial complex (PIC), was one of the formations that emerged from this important struggle. “That was when we had the high time of rallies and mobilizations,” says Coalition Director Khadine Bennett. “It was like life or death.”

Indeed, many young activists saw defeating Prop. 21 as one way to slow the increasing criminalization of youth, especially youth of color. But young organizers also knew that the fairly conservative California electorate would probably vote the bill into law. Realizing this, organizers projected a vision of building a youth movement beyond the fight against the initiative. And though the young people fighting against Proposition 21 didn’t win—the initiative passed overwhelmingly—the long-term victory was clear: after the March 2000 elections, there were many more young people trained and organized to resist an increasingly repressive society. A youth movement was born.

**No Power Like the Power of the Youth**

Youth Force Coalition is just one group that has continued working in the spirit of the struggle against Prop. 21. The Coalition is currently collaborating on a campaign with Books Not Bars, a project of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, on the “Stop the Superjail” campaign. Youth Force has been able to harness some of the energy of the No on 21 fight by engaging youth groups from San Francisco and Oakland in a campaign to stop the expansion of Alameda County’s juvenile hall.

“No matter what work [youth groups] are doing they can trace the line to the PIC,” states Bennett, citing lack of resources as a key factor that ties together the disparate issues that youth organizations work on.

The Coalition, which is housed in the Youth Empowerment Center in Oakland, has mobilized hundreds of young people to meetings with public officials over the past year-and-a-half in an effort to halt construction of a larger hall, and to invest the money they would have spent on a bigger (and unnecessary) juvenile jail into alternatives to incarceration for youth. One big campaign win was getting the State Board of Corrections to withdraw $2.1 million in funding for the new hall.

“We need to not only educate youth but also their teachers and parents,” says
Bennett of juvenile justice issues, “because it’s not just youth that are affected, it affects families and communities.”

Another group that emerged from the Prop. 21 fight, Let’s Get Free (formerly Third Eye Movement 510), has been one of the more active youth groups working on the “Stop the Superjail” campaign. As full-time organizing interns over the summer, Emil Dupont and Sadie Barnette have been making presentations to Oakland summer school students about the campaign, and have done outreach for the campaign’s “Not Down with the Lockdown” rally on street corners and other places where young people gather. At a time when many youth of color have been pushed to the margins of society, it can be hard to engage them in political work.

“People sound really excited and the issues affect them,” comments Dupont about doing street outreach, “but when it comes to them taking another step to do something about it, it ain’t there. There’s one person that [we recruited] that’s been real good; now he always volunteers, he’s been coming to meetings ever since.”

Changing Juvenile Hall from the Inside

Across the Bay in San Francisco, YMAC and the Center for Young Women’s Development, are working to reform the policies and practices of the Youth Guidance Center (YGC), the euphemistic title of the city’s juvenile hall. Both groups know about its problems from the first-hand experience of the youth they work with.

YMAC just celebrated its 10th anniversary, and is known for its innovative programs, where young people are in control of everything from planning city-wide dance parties to doing outreach and developing campaign strategy. Their current juvenile justice campaign strives to get the city to implement a risk assessment tool (developed by YMACers) to address the problem of youth being detained in YGC arbitrarily and for long periods of time while awaiting their court dates.

YMAC has used an “inside/outside” strategy for this campaign, with one of their youth members sitting on an official board to oversee policy development at the hall, as well as having a youth speak-out and pressuring city officials to address their demand. The speak-out was a non-violent, constructive way of engaging youth out-

Activists from many area groups demanding “Schools not Jails” crowd the street in San Diego at the Democratic National Convention. Photo courtesy of Youth Force Coalition

Looking Forward, Moving Ahead

No matter what tactics they are using or where they are working, all these organizers agree that it’s going to take long-term commitment and a lot of hard work to make the changes they want to see.

“Lots of foundations are pushing juvenile justice work right now,” Youth Force Coalition’s Bennett states. Because of the long-term nature of this kind of social change work, she says that foundations need to be in the struggle for the long haul along with organizers and young people.

“Foundations have a responsibility to not just see it as the hot new thing to fund.”

“The amount of work it takes to genuinely, meaningfully prepare young people to run their own organization and their own campaigns is extremely intensive,” says YMAC’s Lee of the lessons she’s learned about this work.

But today’s young activists seem to know that, and are ready to face the challenge.

“Even though I get tired and frustrated,” says Barnette, “I have to do something to be able to focus all that anger against the system into making a change. This is our world, it’s just a matter of us reclaiming it.”

Rona Fernandez is the Executive Director of the Youth Empowerment Center in Oakland, California. You can contact her at rona@youthec.org. For more information, contact: Let’s Get Free (www.ellabakercenter.org/frame2.html); Youth Making a Change (www.colemanadvocates.org/AAYouthMake.htm); Youth Force Coalition (www.youthec.org/youthforce/index.htm); Center for Young Women’s Development (www.cywd.org).
Seattle Youth Challenge Racism

KARIS JACKSON

Youth Undoing Institutional Racism (YUIR) is a youth-centered, youth-run initiative of the Seattle Young Peoples Project (SYPP). SYPP is a youth-led organization that empowers us to take action on the issues that affect our lives. SYPP provides youth with the tools, support, resources, and experience to effectively organize for progressive social change. SYPP is dedicated to supporting initiatives that undo all types of oppression. SYPP and YUIR both work closely with the Coalition to Undo Racism Everywhere, the People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond, as well as with the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), an international Quaker based organization committed to nonviolence and social justice. The AFSC works at the community level both at home and abroad, in partnership with others, for a just society that recognizes the dignity of every person.

The mission of YUIR is to confront and undo racism everywhere. We meet weekly at SYPP to educate ourselves, our communities, and follow the YUIR anti-racist principles. YUIR has worked for five years now to combat all forms of oppression. Although racism is our main focus, we look at every “ism” and how it relates to racism.

Guiding Principles

YUIR was formed in 1999 by youth who attended a 16-hour Undoing Racism training sponsored by the People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond. Students formed YUIR to continue to learn about racism and take action through youth organizing. Members are guided by nine anti-racist principles:

1. We are committed to bringing awareness and change to racist institutions.
2. We are committed to being anti-racist and working within our communities in a non-white [sic] organizational structure.
3. We are committed to becoming and creating more community youth leaders.
4. We are committed to acting with integrity and humanistic values.
5. We are committed to working for a community based on equality and justice.
6. We are committed to accepting all, regardless of race, gender, religion or sexual orientation.
7. We are committed to opposing all forms of oppression, and address every -ism in the context of racism.
8. We are committed to educating ourselves and our peers regarding the history of racism as it is today.
9. We are committed to respect, honesty, and dedication from all members involved in our group.

Current Projects

YUIR currently has many projects, including youth forums against racism, antimilitarism outreach, and racism education campaigns.

Since September 2001, we facilitated 20 presentations to over 500 youth in Seattle public schools and in community-based organizations. In order to build a strong community base we must educate our peers on issues that affect our families and communities. Through these workshops, YUIR provides basic information on institutionalized racism, internalized racial oppression, internalized racial superiority and inferiority, and the resources to undo institutional racism. “After experiencing only one hour of the trainings, for the first time as a young Caucasian female, I understood how public institutions such as the school system can be racist without individuals actually practicing it, also how racism really is ‘in the air we breathe,’” said 17-year-old Jaylene Shelby.

A second current project is countering militarism. Military recruiters often target youth of color. Once in the military, many people of color face discrimination and may be forced to fight racist and morally wrong wars. YUIR is working on leafleting in Seattle area schools to inform youth about the lies that recruiters tell and, with the help of AFSC, we mailed information about alternatives to the military for college tuition or job skills, to all high school students in Seattle. “At a recent rally in front of the local military recruitment office, it was great to see the faces of the government employees realizing that Seattle’s youth are informed and plan to inform the rest of the city of the horrendous race-based statistics,” declared one 18-year-old YUIR intern.

YUIR is also currently putting a lot of effort and organizing into our education campaign for an anti-racist curriculum in all schools. In March 2002, YUIR drafted a list of nine demands to better our education and overall educational experience. These demands include the following: The removal of military recruiters from Seattle Public Schools; the removal of all racist mascots, including the immediate removal of West Seattle High School’s “Indians”; the inclusion of Howard Zinn’s A People’s History of the United States in all high school US history classes, as a regular text to offer students comparison points of view; the extension of undoing racism training to every Seattle public school for their staff within the next two years; the removal of corporate advertising from all Seattle public schools; the reinstatement of the contract with Laidlaw, including hiring unionized drivers; the creation of a student-elected high school oversight board to review and approve all district policies; the prohibition of police officers to carry firearms on school property, except in the case of extreme emergency; and the visible presence at every high school career center of counter-military recruitment forms.

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Seattle Youth Challenge Racism

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and literature.

On June 5, 2002, YUIR held a peaceful, informative, student-organized/student-led rally outside of the Seattle School Board’s “public” community meeting. When YUIR’s youth tried to enter the meeting and voice our opinions and demands, Seattle’s very own armed forces (police) kept the students out with force by barricading all entrances. Franklin High School senior Adrian Boscolo-Hightower said, “They didn’t let us in.” He added, “They were assuming right away that we would go in there and be unruly.”

Despite not being heard at the school board, our message and demands—moving beyond a euro-centric curriculum, stopping military recruiters that target students of color, ending racist mascots, and including “undoing racism” training—were publicized in the local media. YUIR representatives were later invited to participate on the school district’s “Eliminating the Achievement Gap Taskforce.”

Seattle youth have kept steady pressure on the school board, ultimately winning the elimination of racist mascots at West Seattle High School. Photo courtesy of SYPP

The Scapegoating of America’s Youth

RYN GLUCKMAN

In December 1995 John Dilulio, former head of Bush’s Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, published a series of apocalyptic reports predicting a new breed of violent juvenile delinquents, the “teenage superpredators.” Most famous among these reports was the widely read “The Coming of the Super-Predators.”

Even as adult and youth crime indices began to drop from their 1994 peaks, Dilulio, with a handful of other criminologists and academics, warned of violence rooted in the inner cities—specifically in young black men raised by single mothers—that would spill over into unsuspecting white suburbs and infect white kids with the superpredator syndrome. Their warnings were based upon the “youth bulge” theory which blames increasing crime and social disorder on rising numbers of young people.

As Dilulio testified in front of Congress in 1995:

The moral and civic arguments for acting to save America’s at-risk black inner-city children should be enough for any decent American to want to act...... While there is as yet no strong statisti-

cal evidence that inner-city crime has “spilled over” into up-scale urban neighborhoods or adjacent suburbs, the demographics of the problem make the inner cities a ticking crime bomb.

Fast forward to 2001. Contrary to the fears of Dilulio and his colleagues, statistics from the FBI’s 1999 crime report show that violent juvenile crimes are at their lowest point in twenty years. The US Departments of Education and Justice noted that there is a one in two million chance of being killed in a school. Out of all youth-committed crimes, embezzlement increased the most since 1995. Perhaps Dilulio should author a new report: “The Coming of the Super-Embezzlers.”

Criminalization of Youth

Yet, despite every indication that American youth are not crazed, self-serving criminals with a hair-trigger mentality, the American adult public continues to respond to young people as if they are wildly out of control. The U.S. remains the only industrialized country to sentence minors to death, executing 17 youth since the reinstatement of the death penalty in 1976.

Although school crime is at an all-time low, armed guards, metal detectors, and clear backpacks have made their way into the typical American school setting, indicating an increasingly narrow gap between the public school and the prison. In the past 20 years, federal and state policy makers have advocated for more and more punitive measures for juvenile offenders.

These measures often result in the incarceration of 14, 15, and 16 year-olds in adult prisons where they are more likely to be beaten, raped, or commit suicide. These trends are manifestations of an unspoken but almost tangible sentiment: America needs to protect itself from its own children.

This sentiment is a far cry from the notions of rehabilitation that we have held to be fundamental to the juvenile justice system since its inception a century ago. Conservatives argue that the shift from rehabilitative to punitive policies for youth is indicative of an actual change in the nature of young people, while liberals contest that it is people’s perceptions of youth that have changed.

In reality, neither one of these assessments is quite accurate. The incidence of juvenile crime has been, at different times, continued on page six
both higher and lower than it is today. Juvenile crime rates correspond less with growth of the youth population, and more with the number of youth living in poverty.

Media cries of “What’s wrong with our children?” after every school shooting may make you think that there was a time in the nostalgic American past when grown-ups did not believe that youth were out of control. But in truth, American adults have always believed that youth in their time are more violent than kids in the past.

Creation of a Juvenile Justice System

If not due to an actual increase in crime or change in perception, what is to account for the recent warehousing of youth in prisons and heavily guarded public schools? As it turns out, the answer may be found in the rise of the juvenile justice system one hundred years ago. The first juvenile court was established in 1899 in the midst of what seemed like national chaos. While US imperialism was at its height overseas, the increasing entry of immigrants into the US gave birth to new communities of color in growing urban areas. Social Darwinism and eugenics were also at their height, positioning the white adult male as the archetype of superior human evolution.

At the same time women were demanding not only entrance to college but participation in the public sphere, challenging traditional Victorian gender roles. The Industrial Revolution became a symbol of man’s intellect and domination over nature, but some worried that it was a harbinger of a dehumanized world, ruled by technology.

To the white upper classes that headed social reform movements and held public office, it may have seemed as if the social order that had ensured their status and privilege was disintegrating. In the chaos of the turn of the century, concerns about the direction that the nation was taking were articulated through concerns about young people.

Growing populations of immigrant youth represented a threat to white supremacy. The exclusion of youth from the work force as a result of child labor laws represented the increasing dominance of mechanization and technology in the industrial world. Out of attempts to maintain racial, class, gender, and national superiority emerged institutions that focused on the control and regulation of youth.

Myth of Rehabilitation

Today, we imagine the juvenile court at the turn of the century as a system that was rooted in an ideology of rehabilitation. In the name of rehabilitation, reformers advocated for a court system that had little legal formality. In theory, it was an attempt to create a civil rather than criminal process in which youth who entered the system were faced with “advocates” instead of “adversaries.”

In reality, informality of process gave the juvenile court coercive power to extend itself into the homes of those who were outside of middle class standards of “proper parents” or “normal adolescents.” The lack of due process and documentation left the court with little accountability or responsibility for its treatment of parents or children.

Families and youth were left vulnerable to the discrimination of the judges. Immigrant youth and poor youth, who made up the majority of juvenile arrests, were either shipped to reform homes in other parts of the country, used for labor, or put in adult prisons. The court also served as the enforcer of sex and gender norms, arresting disproportionately high numbers of young women, particularly immigrant women, for arbitrary and vague sex offenses: staying away from home, masturbating, using obscene language, “strutting about in a lascivious manner.”

In this system, delinquency became an identification loaded with meaning about race, class, and sex norms and (mis)behaviors. All youth were considered as dependent upon adults to represent their best interest. In that status of dependence they were essentially voiceless—relying on adults to articulate their supposed best interests.

Young people who were identified as “dependent,” “neglected,” or “delinquent,” and thus subject to the court process, were used as tools to criminalize and regulate larger communities of color, poor people, and women. The standardized public school operated in much the same way—monitoring young people for signs of deviation and rewarding normality with privilege and abnormality with punishment. So much for rehabilitation.

At a time when many are pointing to more punitive juvenile justice and public school systems as evidence of some recent change in our attitudes toward young people, a historical examination of the rise of these institutions suggests that perhaps our attitudes are not so different after all.

Punitive History Repeats Itself

There are some interesting parallels between the national environment in which the juvenile justice system arose a century ago and where we are as a nation today. We are facing a new century and a Republican Presidency that looks markedly different from that of the last eight years. We are also confronting an increasingly globalized economy in which the US is a key player.

The 2000 Census reported that California has no racial majority—and demographers predict that the rest of the country will soon follow suit. These characteristics seem a 21st century version of the social changes that characterized the environment in which the juvenile court was born. Reformers of the late 19th century also faced an increasingly smaller world as a result of US imperial projects and increased immigration. Much like the Internet signifies technology that we are unsure of our capacity to handle, commentators in the last century were expressing concerns over the growth of industrialization and the shifting nature of labor.

These similarities provide historical perspective on how youth are currently viewed in the US and why they are being talked about in particular ways. Public debates today in which youth are either positioned alternatively as too young to know better or as primitive superpredators deny young people a personhood, voice, or agency in the here and now.

These debates recall youth discourses of 1900 in which the social control of youth relied on their exclusion from public dialogue. Underlying these discourses one can read a century-old initiative to maintain race, class, and gender hierarchies through the bodies of youth in the face of a rapidly changing society.

Ryn Gluckman is the Program Coordinator at the Population and Development Program, and Program Assistant at the Civil Liberties and Public Policy Program, both at Hampshire College. She is a writer and activist and is currently co-authoring a book on youth oppression and liberation. This article is available at www.zmag.org/content/Youth/gluckman_scapegoating.cfm.
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Resist awards grants six times a year to groups throughout the United States engaged in activism for social and economic justice. In this issue of the Newsletter we list a few grant recipients from our August 2002 allocation cycle. For information, contact the groups at the addresses below.

**PINTIG Cultural Group**
4750 North Sheridan Road, Suite 481, Chicago, IL, 60640
www.pintig.org

For the past four years Resist has supported PINTIG in their cultural work organizing around issues affecting the Filipino-American community through artistic and political expression. Dreamweavers, their current production, depicts the economics of Third World poverty as a way to stimulate discussions about immigration and its global impact on human lives. The play portrays women who refuse to become victimized by globalization processes and, in resisting, become actors in their own self-determination. Through this medium PINTIG strives to bring together cultural and socio-political organizations to stimulate discussions and action towards global justice.

Resist awarded PINTIG $3,000 for Dreamweavers.

**Sistas on the Rise**
1384 Strafard Avenue
Bronx, NY, 10472
tainadelmar@aol.com

Sistas on the Rise creates a space for young women of color to organize for institutional change based on the needs of teen mothers. Currently Sistas on the Rise focuses both on opposing the closing of the only high school in the Bronx that serves the needs of teenage mothers and demanding welfare reform that responds to these needs. In connecting the two issues, the organization works to develop a personal and political sense of ownership among teenagers living in poverty and within the control of the welfare system.

Resist awarded Sistas on the Rise a $3,000 award for general support for their work empowering low-income young mothers of color to organize for social justice.

**Environmental Justice Action Group**
PO Box 11635, Portland, OR, 97211
ejag@teleport.com

Environmental Justice Action Group (EJAG) struggles for environmental justice by empowering low-income communities of color to organize for better health and safety. This year they have focused their organizing campaign on the interrelated issues of asthma, air quality, and the prevalence of toxins in and around their communities. Residents will monitor the environmental quality through bucket brigades and use this information as an activist tool for cleanup and enforcement efforts.

Resist awarded EJAG $3,000 in general support for their work addressing the environmental and public health hazards faced by residents of Portland's multi-racial North/Northeast community.

**Media Tank**
PO Box 42864, Philadelphia, PA 19101
www.mediatank.org

Media Tank strives to broaden the role of the media democracy movement in social change organizing through its demands for media reform and alternatives. Their youth media literacy programs provide tools with which to look at media messages. Additionally, Media Tank's public policy education programs highlight the problematic issues of media consolidation as a way to bring people into the media reform movement. Through their workshops and trainings, Media Tank builds public awareness around media issues and the importance of reform for progressive organizing.

Media Tank received a $2,000 grant for general support for their media literacy and policy education work.