

# SLATE's warm reunion:

## No "Big Chill West" in Berkeley



Photographs: The Sixties

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**I**N 1956 A STORY APPEARED IN THE UC-Berkeley student newspaper the *Daily Californian* with the headline, "Students go wild in UC's worst riot." It was about a water-fight and panty-raid spree. By the late '60s Berkeley had become a worldwide symbol of student revolt. A group that spanned these two eras and played a major part in transforming the one into the other held a reunion here June 22-24.

SLATE (not an acronym, but a name the group took after running a slate of candidates in the student elections) began in the post-McCarthy political void of 1957 and dissolved in 1968. By providing a forum for liberal and leftist students during the later '50s and early '60s SLATE laid the foundation for the 1964 Free Speech Movement, in which many members were active.

For the press and some participants, the question seemed to be: was this reunion going to be *The Big Chill West*? The *Wall Street Journal* decided in advance that it would be, in a story published June 19. The liberal, black-owned *Oakland Tribune* (is that a change from SLATE days!) reported that it wasn't. The 135 or so former SLATE members who gathered to see old friends and discuss the lessons of SLATE were particularly emphatic on this point.

During a Saturday morning discussion of SLATE members' current political activities, Fritjof Thygeson insisted, "This is what gives the lie to *The Big Chill*! We are so much the same!" In fact, the mood of the reunion suggested a New Left *Seeing Red*: self-congratulatory but not smug, reflective but not nostalgic.

Most of the reunion was given over to social events, including a party, an incongruous rubber-chicken hotel banquet and a picnic. On Saturday there were small-group catching-up sessions and discussions of the history of SLATE, current political tasks and sexism—a highly charged issue for a group whose heyday came well before the women's liberation movement.

In one small group, first-generation SLATE members talked about the paths that had led them to political activism and ways they've stayed active since leaving the Berkeley campus. Some, like Jorgia Siegel Bordofsky, were red-diaper babies. Both Jim Gallagher and Duran Bell were in the Young People's Socialist League while they were in SLATE, but in different factions. Gloria Martocchia-Sparrow's parents were anarchists, and her 18-year-old son is active in the anti-nuclear movement.

"My politics have not changed at all," said Martocchia-Sparrow. Though not a member of any "structured group" ("It's that anarchist background"), she has worked in the antinuclear and women's

shelter movements and is proud of her family's left-wing tradition. She works as an editor at a legal publishing firm and sings in a gospel group. "My primary concern now is how women can best function in political groups," she said.

Peter Franck, now a lawyer and a member of Berkeley's left political party Berkeley Citizens Action, said he came to SLATE as a civil libertarian and was radicalized by his SLATE experiences.

Bell, one of the few blacks who attended Berkeley in the late '50s, teaches agricultural economics at UC-Irvine. He feels politically "isolated" compared to his SLATE days, he said, though he has worked on the Jackson campaign recently. "I think I'm still a radical," he said, "but I've never managed to agree with anybody."

The history and lessons of SLATE were the subject of an afternoon session. Thygeson related a conversation he had had with historian Immanuel Wallerstein in New York. "I told him about this reunion and he said it was a very important thing to be going to. He said the student movement was fundamentally shaped by the Berkeley experience and the Berkeley experience was fundamentally shaped by SLATE."

### What made SLATE special?

Until the formation of TASC, and then SLATE, student elections were popularity contests with few substantive issues. University rules prohibited student

groups from taking positions on "off-campus" issues. The new party's first organizing issue was an on-campus one linked to the civil rights movement then beginning to stir the country—racial discrimination in fraternities and sororities. "After *Brown vs. Board of Education* it was an issue we could not lose," said Thygeson. By choosing this issue, SLATE not only brought civil rights close to home, but also challenged the fraternities' and sororities' hold on student government.

After 1957 SLATE members began to win seats on the executive committee while raising issues like voluntary (as opposed to compulsory) ROTC, increased wages for student jobs and election rules allowing candidates to distribute leaflets on campus. At the same time SLATE members were active in campaigns against the death penalty, against above-ground nuclear testing, in support of farm workers' right to organize and many other "off-campus" issues.

One of the most dramatic episodes in SLATE's history was a May 1960 sit-in at a meeting of the House Un-American Activities Committee in San Francisco. Millions watched on national TV as the police used fire hoses to drive the protesters, many of them SLATE members, off the steps of City Hall.

SLATE's strength, former members agreed, was that it was "issue-oriented" and did not try to reach ideological agree-

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