

An extract from "Up the New Channels"

"Student Activism in Brisbane during Australia's Sixties"

by Jon Piccini

(note: sub-headings in yellow were added to this version).....

Raymond Evans has noted how *"from the mid-1960s the University of Queensland vied with Victoria's Monash as Australia's most defiant campus."*

This defiance took many forms, ranging from using the campus as a place for the dissemination and contestation of ideas to outright protest activities which were often met with vehement opposition. Channeling overseas examples of radicalised campuses from Berkley to Paris, Brisbane students sought to appropriate particular spaces as locations for free political debate. Such locations were not immediately forthcoming, however, with an SDA leaflet from late 1966 advertising a protest rally against *"Sir Fred Schonnel's [the Vice-Chancellor's] decision to deny permission for the South East Asia and Australia Conference,"* an anti-war teach-in organised by a variety of community groups, to use university premises for its purposes.

The rally, which was said to have attracted some 2000 students and staff, accused the Vice Chancellor of buckling to political pressure from the National Civic Council and the Country Party, who labeled the conference a *"communist front."* One leaflet distributed at this rally ended with the memorable slogan *"Students of the University Unite. You have nothing to lose but your Vice-Chancellor."*

The Forum

Carole Ferrier and Ken Mansell note how *"sheer persistence"* against the joint menace of university authority and right-wing, particularly engineering, students eventually won through, with *"the Forum between the Union building and the Relaxation Block"* offering by 1967 a *"moderately relaxed environment, as well as space for heated and inspiring political debate."*

The radicals' presence at this lunchtime hotspot soon became such an accepted fact as to allow for SDA to set up a *"mini book stall behind the speaking area,"* with students sitting for hours drinking coffee and listening to an array of speakers and debates. The radicals' imagined domination of the university, which O'Neill described as a *"liberated area"* during the period under investigation, was self-perpetuating. In June 1969, a few weeks after Foco's expulsion from Trades Hall and the Queensland government's banning of the soundtrack to Hair, radical students united with cultural bohemians once again to hold the Erotica Festival, a protest against censorship, in the Great Court. The festivities, noted in Semper to have attracted around 3000 people, included the display of pornographic images, readings of erotic poetry and the soliciting of a *"marijuana cigarette"* (later found not to contain the substance) to acting Vice-Chancellor Teakle. These were high points on a day otherwise plagued by rain, poor organisation and attempts by university security forces to halt proceedings.

Events like this, followed by appropriations such as People's Park, when activists established a tent-city on campus as part of the moratorium protest, fostered in activists a sense of place, if not ownership, of "their" university—a sense they were prepared to defend.

The CMF Occupation

Just after one o'clock in the afternoon on 2 September 1970, a pre-prepared leaflet was distributed to lunchtime crowds, carrying the rather confrontational heading *"The University Regiment now stands on Liberated Ground."*

The act of leafleting was in and of itself a daily occurrence on campus, however this one was different — declaring that *"Anti-Imperialist students have today liberated the premises of the University of Queensland Regiment"* with an intention of highlighting how *"for years the building has been used by the Australian Army to train students to become part of the war machine."*

The leaflet announced student plans to turn the space into *"a twenty-four hour ... centre for the September moratorium for Indochina"* which would

host workshops "*and a centre for discussion.*" Dick Shearman, leading member of the Revolutionary Socialist Student Alliance (RSSA) — established by SDA members who sought "*to pass from a protest organisation to a radical or revolutionary movement*" after the group's April 1969 dissolution — describes how the occupation was organised by fifteen to twenty radicals as a part of the lead up to the September moratorium rally.

After declaring their intention to occupy the building at a lunchtime rally¹, 200 students entered the army headquarters unmolested; "*the main problem,*" however, "*was how to get out.*"

While some students took to destroying army files, others felt the need to leave "*for French at two, or a tute at three,*" a desire only exacerbated by the swift arrival of "*the Army ... along with students from the Union and would-be liberal candidates*" intent on ending the takeover.

Most occupiers then left the building by smashing a rear window, leaving Shearman and a small group of other radicals to negotiate. While no arrests were made on the day, seven students (including Shearman, Mitch Thompson, and Semper editor² Jim Prentice) were charged with offences under the Crimes and Defence Act, culminating in a short period during which the activists went "*underground,*" hiding from the Special Branch. Shearman, being interviewed about the takeover years later, defended the group's actions as a response to the use of university grounds for reactionary purposes, declaring, "*the Army had no place on campus.*" Admissions, however, were made as to "*the doubtful nature of the decision-making process*" surrounding the occupation, while other students of a less radical nature labeled Shearman and other RSSA members "*provocateurs.*"

The Quang Incident

The moratorium campaign, though highly successful in mobilising hundreds of thousands of Australians against the war, was seen by the right wing of student politics as an unpatriotic affront. One leaflet distributed by the right-wing Democratic Club (associated with the Democratic Labor Party) entitled "*A Comment on Vietnam Moratorium Campaign*" indicated that "*it [the moratorium] serves only communist purposes*" and "*undermines the morale of not only the South Vietnamese anti communists, but of anti communists throughout the region.*"

In response, pro-war students invited Luic Tuong Quang, South Vietnam's ambassador to Australia, to an open meeting two days after the CMF incident. The events which occurred during and immediately after this meeting — labelled either "*Black Friday*" or "*The Quang Incident*" — are still disputed, however what is known is that the meeting was attended by both anti- and pro-war students in roughly equal measure. Conflict was quick to develop over the inability of the ambassador to adequately answer a question pertaining to the safety of an arrested Saigon student leader, at which point radicals spontaneously decided to blockade Quang's exit. Shearman, a participant in these events also, recounted that "*scuffles broke out between students and security ... and several union cleaners as Quang was escorted down some stairs to a waiting car,*" while Special Branch and ordinary police officers — at the invitation of either the Union or the Democratic Club — entered campus in order to assist the ambassador's exit, a clear violation of university regulations.

What ensued was described in the Courier-Mail as an "*hour long battle,*" with a growing number of anti-war radicals facing off with police, whose vehicles were blockaded. Several officers were injured, one of whom was apparently hospitalised, while one student was arrested for assault, leading to calls from the new, relatively-unknown premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen that the university be brought "*under control.*" Police Minister Hodges commented a day later that "*the State Government had no intention of allowing a minority of anarchist students to disrupt decent community life,*" while accusations flew between the centre-right student union and anti-war radicals as to who was responsible for events. A full university enquiry later saw Shearman suspended from UQ for two years for his participation in both the CMF occupation and the "*Quang Incident,*" a clear indication that the university administration was unwilling to support the activists' imagined purchase on the university as a radical centre.

¹ Correction: Most sources agree that a lunchtime rally was not held before the occupation of the CMF compound.

² Correction: Bruce Dickson (and not Jim Prentice) was the editor of Semper in 1970.