

# SDS: Copping Out of American Life

Michael Parker

SINCE THE JUNE NATIONAL CONVENTION OF Students for a Democratic Society, the vagaries of the student left have almost displaced the Living Theater as the favorite topic of the New, Hip journalists. From the *Village Voice* to *Esquire*, they have chortled and tutted over the activities of Weatherman, Rym-II, WSA, and PL.\* And after a verse or two of their own shticks—liberalism, social democracy, youth culture, or what have you—they have all closed with a sadly triumphant chorus of “I told you so.”

It would be nice to think that the SDS Convention was not really all that bad, or that it was merely a joke in poor taste on the part of History. Unfortunately, the convention really was a shambles, and still more unfortunately, it really did reflect the state of the new left today, if in an exaggerated way. The games of “I’m more Maoist than you” that went on there can also be found, somewhat toned down, in most movement publications and most broad groups of campus radicals. The exaggerations at the SDS convention arose because the people who attended are the most active and involved, and hence those who react most sharply to political developments. And just as the sorry state of SDS today reflects the state of the new left generally, so the history of SDS gives a sharply-focused picture of the evolution of the new left, the problems it has faced, and the ways in which it has met them.

In part, these problems arise from the very nature of the role of intellectuals in social change. Intellectuals, and particularly students, are often the first to react to political and social problems. Students, after all, are trained to think generally, abstractly, and about more remote problems. Moreover, they are partly free of the elaborate web of social institutions that helps keep discontent in check, including an overriding day-to-day concern with making a living. For most people, peer groups are defined by the workplace and the neighborhood. But students can, and do, define their own peer groups on almost any basis they choose.

However, this relative freedom to act is an aspect of the intellectuals’ inability to act effectively, their relative powerlessness vis-a-vis

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\* For those who have missed the instant-replays: Weatherman is the larger part of the former Revolutionary Youth Movement (RYM) faction which, together with the smaller part, Rym-II, walked out of the convention and, as a minority rump, expelled the Worker-Student Alliance (WSA), the faction dominated by the Progressive Labor Party (PL), while holding onto the national office, printing plant, mailing lists, bank accounts, and debts of the SDS. The political differences among these groups, while not trivial, had little to do with the events of the convention.

the society as a whole. Universities may be of great importance to the bureaucratic society over the long run, for the managers and technicians they train, but their daily operations have little effect on society. A strike at any of a number of key industrial plants will have major and immediate repercussions throughout the society. A strike at a major university has little impact except as a demonstration of sentiment.

For this reason, the classic problem for radical intellectuals has been to find social forces capable of changing society. Revolutionary socialists since Marx have looked to the working class as the only force in society that both *can* make the social revolution and in the long run *has* to do so in defense of its vital interests. But other social forces have also attracted intellectuals, and the choice of a social force to orient toward is both a result and a determiner of one's politics.

SDS WAS FOUNDED IN 1960. The labor movement was quiescent. Poverty had not yet been "discovered." McCarthyism had all but wiped out traditional left organizations. The Woolworth sit-ins, the takeoff point of the civil rights movement, had just begun.

The young left on the campus identified strongly with the civil rights movement. But that movement itself, still mostly middle-class and intellectual, needed to look toward some social force outside itself. The solution at the time, for the civil rights movement and the campus left, was liberalism. The state was seen as an entity above society that could remake society. Social change lay with the Supreme Court, Kennedy's advisors, and assorted liberal study groups. The famous *Port Huron Statement* adopted by SDS in 1962 was explicit. The peace movement was urged to become "an opposition viewpoint within the centers of serious decision-making" in order to be effective, while the "disinherited" were urged to "demand a Democratic Party responsible to their interests." And finally, "a new left must include liberals and socialists, the former for their relevance, the latter for their sense of thorough-going reforms in [*sic*] the system."

The continued development of the civil rights movement and the increasing pressure of the war in Vietnam raised questions about the effectiveness of catching the ear of the Establishment. But even after the 1964 Democratic Convention, at which the liberals caved in on the seating of the Mississippi Freedom Democrats, SDS still raised the slogan of "Part of the way with LBJ." Already, however, the new turn toward the urban poor was evident.

The concept of the poor as a force for social change was developed by a process of elimination, rather than analysis. The liberals had proven their bad faith. The working class, as everyone knew, had been bought off with cars and tv sets. The only ones who could make the revolution, because they had nothing to lose, were the poor. And the

way to get them to move was to go live in their communities and organize them for social action.

Alas, the poor are not easy to organize. Their neighborhoods destroy instead of build social cohesion. Once they are organized, their demands—street repairs, garbage collection—can be met. And finally, because they are unemployed and only marginal to the society, the social power they possess is little greater than that of students.

As SDS members drew these conclusions from the experience of the community organizing projects, they renewed the search for a viable force for social change. One possibility posed itself in 1965 when an SDS-sponsored demonstration against the Vietnam war drew tens of thousands of people to Washington, to the astonishment of all especially the organizers. But even before the last banner was furled, the SDS leadership had announced its opposition to any further broad demonstrations, in favor of community organizing and “base-building.” This policy would be maintained for four tumultuous years, until the October 1969 demonstrations in Chicago.

The artificial counterposition of mass demonstrations and local organizing was in part a healthy response to the futility of one-shot activities organized by a self-appointed elite for whom the masses were merely a device for getting the attention of the establishment. But it was also a reflection of the ideological weakness of SDS, its lack of a program or perspective that could relate mass demonstrations to local programs. However, the war and the massive opposition it was generating, and the escalation of the black rebellion, required more than local solutions, and deeper analysis than “Let the people decide.” From opponents of ideology, SDS members were transformed into frantic seekers of ideology.

THE SEARCH FOR IDEOLOGY WITHIN SDS was accelerated by the entrance of Progressive Labor. To the national leadership and the bulk of local members, PL posed a double threat. On the one hand, its worked-out ideology and especially its proclaimed orientation toward the working class attracted many SDS members as well as many students just entering the new left. PL seemed serious about politics, even to the extent of requiring totally “straight” appearance of members and holding left-Puritan attitudes toward drugs, sex, and life generally. Unattractive as this may have been, it was in marked contrast to the dilettantist, pleasure-oriented, and highly erratic conduct of much of the new left.

The other half of the PL threat was its organizational role in SDS. Since it sees itself as *the* vanguard and holds a very static notion of consciousness, PL favors all sorts of struggle over minimal demands. but as soon as these struggles began to develop any ideology, such as nationalism, student power, or community control, that was different

from or fell short of *the* ideology (that is, PL's), they were to be not only criticized but opposed. SDS members were told, in effect, that they had no business trying to develop an ideology for SDS. The function of SDS was to struggle for the sorts of immediate demands that could be won from the system. Anyone who wanted to go beyond that, to change the system, should join the revolutionary vanguard, otherwise known as PL. In those SDS chapters that it dominated, PL was extremely heavy-handed, insisting that all discussion be directed toward implementing the few concrete programs that PL had designated as worthy of struggle.

SDS had always been hostile to organized political groups, which were seen as "old left hang-ups." But this hostility was particularly strong toward PL. By 1968 even members of other organizations were being urged to go to national meetings with the objective of "Get PL." The need to counter PL's relatively sophisticated ideology, along with the more pressing need to respond to the French events, the Kennedy and McCarthy campaigns, the Czech invasion, and Chicago, accelerated the drive for ideology within SDS. From Debray and Che ("The year of the Heroic Guerrilla"), the SDS leadership moved on to a version of Maoism tailored to cast PL's brand of Maoism outside the pale. At the 1968 SDS convention there had been strong anarchist and "non-ideological" tendencies; by the 1969 convention these had all but disappeared. Everyone thought him or herself a Marxist; most were Maoists; and while some found it hard to swallow, the bulk of the RYM leadership openly identified with Stalin. The flight from "anti-ideology," participatory democracy, and "Let the People Decide" to Joe Stalin, and in less than three years, is the best indication of SDS's isolation from real mass struggles and its consequent freedom to float with any idea that fits its needs of the day.

The extent to which the fight against PL shaped the ideology of the rest of SDS may be seen in the fact that, during the RYM caucuses at the Chicago convention, most people did not even find it odd that a minority caucus was expelling what may have been the majority of the convention. This stemmed partly from the conviction that they were the real SDS and that the PLers (and the many more who supported PL) were interlopers in *their* organization. But it was also due to the influence of PL's attitude toward the idea of internal democracy: that it was utopian, petty-bourgeois, and a counterrevolutionary device to waste time.

In fact, the distance between "anti-ideology" and participatory democracy, and Stalinism, is not as great as it might at first appear. Lacking a coherent analysis that could provide a sense of the dynamics of social change, the new left could only respond to events impressionistically. In a period of optimism, ideology was seen as hampering the self-

mobilization of the masses; all that was needed was to "let the people decide," and the revolution would be won. When this did not happen, the masses were discarded and all hope was placed in an external force that would remake society.

ON PAPER, SDS HAS TURNED its orientation toward the working class. In fact it has turned in quite a different direction. Faced with a low level of working class consciousness and activity and enduring increasing repression from the state, the SDS leadership has given up on America generally. Their hopes are placed in powerful social movements in other countries. The role of the American left is exclusively to aid these struggles abroad. Within this role, almost any action is justified. For example, when leaders of RYM-II and others charged that the October national action in Chicago was "adventurist," SDS national secretary Bill Ayers of Weatherman responded:

...if it is a world-wide struggle, if Weatherman is correct in that basic thing, that the basic struggle in the world today is the struggle of oppressed peoples against US Imperialism, then it is the case that *nothing we could do in the mother country could be adventurist.*

No matter if the course of action convinces every other American that the left is a dangerous bunch of nuts, as long as it "hampers" US imperialism it is correct.

As for the American working class, it has no right to fight for its own interests. If workers want to be part of the revolutionary movement, they must first give up their "white skin privileges." Of course it is true that white workers are better off than black workers, and that black workers must organize against their own special oppression. But to call the present level of the white working class "privileged" rather than raising demands to end the exploitation of the entire working class is only to strengthen one of the major ideological underpinnings of racism among white workers. And unfortunately, RYM carries the logic of its position to all other workers' struggles. Bob Avakian, leader of RYM-II and the Revolutionary Union, argued during the Oakland Black Panther conference that "workers in the oppressor nation have no right to struggle for democratic demands." And at the SDS convention, one woman explained that her working class father came home each night exhausted and said that SDS should have some program for him other than just going to Free Huey demonstrations. The response was, "Fuck him."

The anti-working class attitudes within SDS have many ramifications. The contempt for organizational democracy reflects the feeling that the ranks cannot be trusted to make the right choices. And if the ranks of an organization like SDS cannot be trusted, why would anyone think that the masses of people could make the right choices? The

concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat, which for Marxists means that the working class as a whole will rule society, is turned into its opposite: the rule over the working class by a small elite. Frustrated by the impossible task of remaking a whole society when the masses are not willing to follow, the SDS leadership has fallen back on the model of Stalin's Russia, where a strong leader and a determined cadre remade society against overwhelming odds and overcoming all opposition.

A LOT HAS CHANGED IN SDS over the last nine years. But underneath the peculiar jargon—a mishmash of Third Period Stalinist rhetoric and the sort of fake-illiterate speech that students imagine workers talk—a lot has stayed the same. SDS's origins in technocratic liberalism have left marks. The contempt for workers and the masses of people generally, the reliance on elites to bring about social change—these are still the same. Disappointed by the Washington brand of elite, the SDS leaders have shifted their hopes to more distant elites, who because they are distant and are extremely unlikely ever to be in a position to enforce social change in the United States, are also unlikely ever to be quite so big a disappointment as “Part of the Way” LBJ was. They have shifted their loyalties from one to the other of the two class systems struggling for the world; but they have been unable to break from the common assumptions and attitudes of the two ruling classes.

This is not true of thousands of others. The hope of the left, and of the future itself, lies with the young people who *have* broken with elitism and paternalism, many of whom are finding their way to the ideas of revolutionary socialism.

The SDS convention was a severe setback to the movement. It meant that radicals must start all over winning the respect and confidence of the masses of young people who want social change.

The 1969 SDS convention was the lancing of a boil, an ugly procedure at best. But if those parts of the movement that are still healthy learn from the experience and take antiseptic measures, the patient will recover. In the end it may be even stronger for the operation.

MICHAEL PARKER *is a member of the International Socialists.*

# SDS: An Experiment in Pragmatism Fails

Paula Reimer

WHATSOEVER HAPPENED TO THE “NEW LEFT”?

Everyone remembers it. It was the designation assumed by many new radicals at the beginning of the 1960s. They rejected the factionalism and sectarianism of the “old left.” They disliked stale and sterile rhetoric. They revolted against bureaucratic manipulation and undemocratic procedures. They rejected “ideology” as the source of these evils. They were going to begin again. The organization that came to symbolize much of this new beginning was the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS).

SDS still exists . . . just barely. But it exists today as a caricature of everything it had rejected earlier.

To describe the factional divisions in SDS now requires the aid of charts. To fathom SDS sectarianism would task the most rigid purist. To listen to the new SDS rhetoric is to enter the realm of the grotesque (I grant that SDS rhetoric is not stale, though it is indeed sterile). And some of the most cynical bureaucrats of the “old left” could have picked up a trick or two at the recent SDS Convention, where a minority caucus expelled the rest of the convention by the simple procedure of walking out. Worst of all, of course, since it affects the whole movement, is SDS’ introduction of hooligan methods into the radical movement on a scale not seen since the heyday of Stalinism.

SDS now lays claim to an ideology. But what an ideology! And generous we must be to describe SDS thought as such.

Why? What happened to SDS? Why did it fall apart—especially at a time of increasing radicalization? It will not be possible, due to limitations of space, to examine this question completely. I do, however, want to touch on a few key points.

SDS WAS IN MANY WAYS a unique formation in radical history. It was a conjunctural phenomenon—that is, its development reflected (1) contemporary, but temporary, objective conditions in American and world politics, and (2) certain subjective factors in the thinking of newly radicalized youth. As these objective and subjective factors have changed over the years, so have the politics of SDS.

Two of the most important influences on the development of the “new left” were the conjunctural quiescence of the American working class and the decline of American Stalinism.

The impact of the long post-WW II prosperity, coupled with the reaction of the McCarthy era, put the American working class into a political slumber from which it has yet to awaken. Simultaneously,