

14 Charles Lane  
New York, N.Y. 10014  
May 30, 1975

TO ALL ORGANIZERS AND NATIONAL COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Dear Comrades,

Attached for your information is a report by Fred Feldman on a recent dinner sponsored by the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee.

Comradely,

*Barry Sheppard*<sub>ms</sub>  
Barry Sheppard  
SWP National Office

Report on "Debs-Thomas Dinner" Held May 10, 1975

by Fred Feldman

On May 10 the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC) held a "Debs-Thomas" banquet in New York City. The "Eugene V. Debs-Norman Thomas Award" was given to Bernard Rifkin, a veteran social democrat and union official who recently retired as Education Director of District Council 37 of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees. Rifkin was also presented with awards by his former subordinates in District Council 37's Education Department and by Martin Gerber, president of the New York-New Jersey region of the United Auto Workers.

Nearly 150 people attended the banquet. Tickets cost \$40 each. Reporters got a reduced rate. In addition to the Militant, reporters were present from the Vancouver Sun and Canadian News Service (a Canadian equivalent of AP and UPI). Reporters were seated at a special table with DSOC National Secretary Jack Clark. As a representative of the Militant, I was given a friendly reception.

Others at my table included Brendan Sexton, who works in the United Auto Workers Education Department. I was asked for my impressions on the April 26 demonstration on jobs. They held the view that the problems at the demonstration were not primarily the result of ultraleft disruption, but were due to the failure of leaders like Abel to organize the kind of activity where the demonstrators would feel like they were participating in an important action, rather than just listening to speakers from the stands. They noted the organizational weakness of the organizers of the action, which they attributed to long lack of involvement in real struggles like the antiwar movement. Their views paralleled those expressed by Victor Gotbaum, President of District Council 37, in a recent letter to the New York Times. Gotbaum denounced the Times editorial assertion that the difficulties at the rally proved it was a mistake to hold mass actions on the jobs question.

Victor Gotbaum was Toastmaster (chairman) for the evening's activity. Other speakers included Sol Stein of the Textile Workers Union, Jacob Shenkman (President of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union), Victor Reuther, Michael Harrington, and David Barrett, the Canadian New Democratic Party's Premier of British Columbia.

Barrett was the featured speaker and his talk aroused a great deal of enthusiasm. His main emphasis was on the successes Canadian labor had attained by breaking from what he called the "free enterprise parties" and establishing an independent party of the "labor-democratic-socialist movement." He stressed gains like socialized medicine that were won, he said, by putting pressure on the conservatives and liberals, and then tossing them out of office. He said that Canada was not that different from the U.S. and that the same road could be followed by the "labor-democratic-socialist movement" here.

He remarked ironically, "Of course here, unlike in Canada, you have a lot to choose from between the Democrats and Republicans." The whole audience laughed at this. Then he added, "But if you don't really think there's much choice, you can do what we've done in Canada." This got a very excited response, especially from younger leaders of DSOC like Jack Clark.

Victor Reuther introduced Rifkin. He commented that he thought Barrett was right about the U.S. and it might not be very long before the U.S. took the same road. He then talked about his effort to obtain Rifkin's freedom when the latter was captured by Bolivian tin miners some years ago. The award emphasized Rifkin's work for the AFL-CIO International Affairs Department in Iran and Bolivia, stating that he was eventually expelled from both countries for trying to organize "effective unions."

Rifkin spoke briefly, giving a general social-democratic talk about poverty in America. He noted that he didn't regard his years in the socialist movement as a sacrifice since, "I was doing what I like to do and being paid well for it."

Harrington spoke at the very end. Indirectly, he took issue with Barrett. He said, "There is no socialist current in America. We want to create one by working in the mainstream of American political life, where the unions, the Blacks, the Chicanos, and the women are." It was clear that he meant the Democratic party although he never mentioned the name.

DSOC is still deeply committed to Democratic party politics, but it is being affected by the disillusionment and cynicism in the labor movement about the performance of the Democrats and their "veto-proof" congress in the face of the depression. There is a growing tendency for DSOC to present the cover of a more independent face. The early descriptions of DSOC as merely a "socialist caucus" in the Democratic party (descriptions which still dominated the February convention of DSOC) were not heard here. Reuther's statement gave indications that he is not unwilling to hint at a greater political independence as a pressure tactic on the Democrats. His speech also indicated that he is sympathetic to those in DSOC who want the organization to present a more independent, leftish face while maintaining the Democratic party orientation.

Every gathering of DSOC that I have attended has been addressed by a speaker from the Canadian New Democratic party. In the past, these speakers always uncritically endorsed DSOC's strategy. Barrett was the first NDP representative to strongly imply that DSOC should follow the NDP's course instead and take its distance from the Democratic party. Except for Harrington, no one seemed the least embarrassed or irritated by his remarks. At earlier gatherings, the slightest suggestion of a break with the Democrats was regarded as sacrilege.

Those in attendance were primarily from the New York-New Jersey area with some coming in from Philadelphia and Boston.

The banquet reflected the continuing growth of interest in DSOC among sections of the labor bureaucracy.

Sol Stein of the Textile Workers Union made an appeal for unity in the socialist movement and bemoaned splits, while indicating his general solidarity with DSOC. His comments were greeted with a sneer by Clark and other youth who obviously want nothing more to do with Social Democrats-USA (from which DSOC split in early 1973). However, there is obviously some sentiment at the top in DSOC for keeping the lines open to the other wing of the Social Democrats (and therefore with the Meanyite wing of the bureaucracy).

The gathering ended with the singing of "Solidarity Forever." After that a rather large part of the group sang the "Internationale."

Generally, this gathering indicates that DSOC is continuing to shift its image leftward. For instance, a new booklet about DSOC omits the main resolution approved by the conference, which included passages deploring the shift of resources to the Middle East from the "industrial west." Instead it emphasizes the resolution opposing aid to the Thieu regime. The Vietnam war has very few supporters in DSOC these days.