

NEC SDS Convention Report -- June 20, 1968
by Carol Lipman

Political pressures from the Vietnam war, the French events, and the 1968 elections, and internal pressure from an organized political tendency, the Stalinist-Maoist Progressive Labor Party, have combined to produce a developing political crisis within Students for a Democratic Society. The convention of 800 (500 or more voting delegates) in East Lansing, Michigan June 9-15 showed the beginnings of a crystalization of political views in response to these pressures.

In a YSA report on the 1967 convention in Ann Arbor, Michigan we characterized SDS as maintaining and extending their political retreat from the major political issue confronting radical youth-- the Vietnam war. We saw their frustration and retreat increase in proportion to the escalation of the Vietnam war.

At their December National Council meeting they took a step forward. The new leadership, (Davidson, Calvert, Spiegel, Pardun, etc.) although cliquist, seemed serious about coming to grips with the Vietnam war. An attempt was made in a series of articles appearing in New Left Notes and the National Guardian (prior to their NC meeting) to develop an analysis of the radicalization taking place in this country and around the world. SDS projected realistic projects primarily around the issue of the war, and decided to send an observer to the National Mobilization Committee. The National Council voted for a Ten Days of Action against the war in April.

But SDS did not mobilize behind this call. It was through the Student Mobilization Committee that these actions were built, culminating in the International Student Strike and the massive April 27 demonstrations. At the SDS Spring National Council meeting, just prior to the April antiwar actions they again retreated. They spent a major portion of their National Council fruitlessly discussing the draft.

This year's convention met following a major revolutionary upheaval in France and on the same weekend DeGaulle ordered a ban on the revolutionary organizations in France. It met while the Paris "peace" negotiations are going on as a cover for further escalation of the Vietnam war, and in the midst of the 1968 election campaign.

At this convention SDS passed no programmatic resolutions (except for a minor one on the military) and took twelve full hours to elect their national leadership. This convention was beset with continuous faction fighting. On the surface the fight was against the Progressive Labor Party, but the discussions which occurred had much broader implications.

Who was there?

There were approximately 60 members of the Progressive Labor Party present. About 80 members and close sympathizers attended one of their closed caucus meetings. At the last SDS National Council meeting, a new SDS chapter was formed in New York: The "Up Against the Wall, Mother Fuckers." They try to organize, in their own words, the "drop-outs," and have affected the New York regional office of SDS. This chapter is the center of a developing anarchist wing of SDS.

There are three or four groupings among the "real" SDSers. (1) The secondary leadership layer including types like Steve Halliwell, Tom Bell, Bernadine Dohrn, Bob Gottlieb and Maomi Jaffee represent the "new working class" Marcusian-oriented wing. Eric Mann from the New England region is the most right wing spokesman for this grouping. (2) Calvert, Davidson, Pardun, Eanet, Wilkerson, McCarthy, Spiegel are the main "new left" spokesmen today, but are not die-hard Marcusians and haven't yet dismissed the industrial working class as an important force for changing society. (3) Mark Rudd, Jeff Jones and other local leaders who maintain an aloofness from any faction. All of the elements in this "real"-SDS category are the anti-PL core of SDS.

There were about 50-60 healthy open-minded SDSers at the convention. Carl Oglesby attended. There were about six Communist Party members, but no big leaders. Representatives of the right-wing exclusionary caucus in the Student Mobilization Committee attended, as well as about four Spartacists.

Type of Convention

In New Left Notes the old national leadership projected a "new type" of convention for SDS-- more workshops and less time spent in plenary sessions-- with the national council taking up many questions traditionally taken up at the convention. The old leadership projected three days of workshops and one day of convention plenary. The agenda presented by the steering committee for the plenary was: (1) National Secretary's Report, (2) Structure, (3) Labor Resolutions, (4) Military and (5) High School.

This was an attempt to avoid or minimize a full political discussion over disagreements brewing in SDS and keep the convention running smoothly. The agenda was debated and amended to include (1) Resolution on Perspectives by Halliwell, Bell and Dohrn and (2) Independent Electoral Politics.

Halliwell, Bell, Dohrn Resolution

This resolution was a feeble attempt to develop a "radical" perspective for SDS in organizing in the cities and in the university. It was an attempt to counter PL's politics on (1) role of the working class in social change, (2) the worker-student alliance and to (3) develop a political perspective

for structural changes in SDS necessary to develop a more cadre-oriented organization. In his presentation of the resolution, Bell said "there is a new left analysis that can provide the basis for our program and organization...we may see the phenomenon of a student organization forming its own parent organization."

Their "new left" analysis, though, is a right-wing alternative to PL's program. Their resolution says "America is faced with a set of contradictions around the work-income connections. As Marcuse points out, technology has replaced labor as the central factor in productivity..." or "...since earlier radical analysis has depended on the role of labor in the productive process as the prime contradiction, the switch to technology drastically alters the way in which labor can be treated in the future organizing efforts..."

In the face of the French events, this analysis did not fare too well with a large section of SDS. Although led by PL, there was a significant attack on the resolution and on Marcusianism, utilizing the example of the French workers and students to show the role that the industrial working class can and will play in the revolutionary change in society. In addition, many SDSers didn't agree with the structural changes implied in the resolution leading SDS toward a more cadre-oriented organization. The resolution was defeated by a substantial majority.

Structure

An open faction fight came to the fore during the discussion and debate under structural changes and proposals. Although neither of the two main structural proposals would have made much difference in the functioning of SDS, it was around the defense of, or opposition to, a particular proposal or both proposals that the faction fight broke out. Each grouping saw a victory or defeat as a victory for its political perspective for SDS. Of the two major resolutions one (written by Jeff Segal) was seen more as a "centralizer," the other (by the Up Against the Wall Chapter) was viewed as a decentralizer (titled "The Destructuring of SDS.")

The Segal resolution was supported by the SDS-SDS category, the other by the anarchist element, and PL and its periphery opposed any structural change at all. The division became very apparent in this discussion. Because of the constitutional provision that it is necessary to have a 2/3 voting majority for any change in the constitution, Progressive Labor held a veto power over any resolution. PL didn't want any structural change, because the looser and less defined both politically and organizationally, SDS is a good breeding ground for recruitment to PL.

This led to tremendous stresses and strains. Ben Morier, leader of the East Side Up Against the Wall chapter, opened an emotional attack on PL. He said that "they are only in SDS to recruit to their organization and don't give a damn

about the development of SDS as a revolutionary organization." By the end of the discussion both resolutions were defeated, even though a substantial majority voted for the Segal amendments.

Different caucuses met all evening in preparation for the elections to be held the following morning. SDS-SDS assumed that PL was angling for taking over a substantial section of the officers and all united against them to prevent this possibility. The SDS-SDS caucuses had a hard time finding anyone who would take the responsibility of running for office.

The Election of Officers

After the initial nominations and declinations only one person accepted for National Secretary, one for National Interorganizational Secretary and two for National Educational Secretary. With ten different people demanding the floor (someone clamoring for the right to a no vote, some calling the elections a farce, others demanding to caucus to convince others to run,) Tom Bell grabbed a microphone and led a vicious red-baiting attack on PL. He said that PL should not exist within SDS as an organization, that PL had spent the whole convention "preventing us from coming to any decisions." After Bell's 15-minute attack he was given an ovation. Someone cried "PL out!", which was picked up in a loud chant and hand clapping affair by over half of the delegates present. (Mark Rudd, seated in front of us, asked the YSA to join in on their assault on PL.)

A cool headed chairman (McCarthy) calmed the audience down by proposing a three way debate to last as long as necessary to air all the differences. Three microphones were set up: a pro-PL, pro-Bell, and neutral. Most of the attacks on PL came from the right politically and were on the whole emotional red-baiting attacks. Many, who said they disagreed with PL, were disgusted with the level of the attack and defended PL's right to stay in the organization. Although no motion was on the floor, it was suggested a few times that PL be removed.

After a few hours of debate, it was clear that the majority of those present were not ready to exclude PL from the organization. The healthy elements there were forced to side with PL because of the factional situation. After the debate closed, with no resolution of the discussion, the national officers were elected. Mike Klonsky from LA was elected National Secretary by a 594 yes vote and a 373 no vote. Bernadine Dohrn became Interorganizational Secretary (760 yes vote and a 207 no vote) and Les Coleman, who is one of the spokesmen for the Calbert, Davidson clique, was defeated by an unknown (Fred Gordon) by a margin of 50 votes.

The following National Interim Committee was elected: With majorities on the first ballot: Mike James (National Community Union--Chicago), Mike Speigle (out-going National Secretary) and Carl Oglesby (old national leadership). In

the second balloting a PLer from Boston, who got a high vote in the first round, was defeated. Those with majorities in the second vote were: Chip Marshall (Niagra region), Jeff Jones (New York region), Barty Haile (Texas), Eric Mann (New England) and Morgan Spector (Berkeley).

On the whole the national officers and National Interim Committee members are factionally opposed to PL.

Reaction to the French Revolt

A little-discussed resolution was passed in support of the French students and workers. It reached the convention floor late, after the majority of the delegates left because of the faction fight. The discussion under the Halliwell Resolution, on the role of the working class, clearly indicated that the French events had an impact on a large number of SDSers. There were black and red flags flying throughout the convention and a feeble attempt was made to sing the "International". Another sign of the impact of the French events was the response by the SDSers when a reporter from The Worker introduced herself. The convention broke into laughter and booing.

Afro-American Struggle

A panel on racism was held before the convention plenaries. John Levin, a PLer from San Francisco, and a panel member, attacked what he called "petty-bourgeois nationalists" in the black struggle, and emphasized the class character of the struggle for socialism. He was interrupted by a demonstration from the floor which began with a cry: "Our answer to black rebellion is supposed to be white rebellion, and I've not heard a word about that." Criticism of some of the black student organizations for being petty-bourgeois cultural nationalists, and the emphasis on the class struggle approach, got a sympathetic ear from many SDSers who have probably been having a good deal of problems relating to and working with the black student unions on their campuses. Bob Pardun interrupted and defended PL's right to speak, saying: "Brother Levin is not our class enemy." He was greeted with cries of "yes, he is."

1968 Elections

A discussion of the 1968 elections occurred during the last session of the convention. It centered on a resolution submitted by the Peace and Freedom Party. There was a general sentiment against "capitalist candidates" among the SDSers at the convention, and most viewed the McCarthy campaign as a threat to SDS.

The Peace and Freedom Party, particularly the California branch, was looked upon with interest and support, especially because of the participation of the Black Panther Party in P and F. Nobody attacked the P and F from the left during the discussion on the resolution. PL came out very hard in support

of the Peace and Freedom Party. Their political justification was that the masses of people, who are against the war in Vietnam, but not necessarily against capitalism, have to have a way to express their opposition to the Vietnam war (not through mass demonstrations).

The convention did not pass the resolution to support P and F but tabled it because there were so few delegates present.

Many SDSers see no contradiction in supporting the Peace and Freedom Party and the Socialist Workers election campaign. As the 1968 elections draw near, the abstentionism from electoral politics, prevalent among a large number of SDSers only a few months ago, disappears. They see electoral action as justifiable now, as long as it aids in local organizing. The only sentiment expressed for boycott came from the anarchist wing of SDS.

Antiwar

There was no serious discussion of the war in Vietnam or the antiwar coalition. Syd discussed the fight within the Student Mobilization Committee informally with several SDSers, but it was never taken up in the convention. During one of the plenary sessions, while someone was listing the fraternal organizations to SDS, the question was asked: "What about the SMC?" The answer given was no, and there was a loud round of applause expressing approval that SDS was not connected with the SMC. The draft, (there was only a workshop on the question) was given a back seat. Many SDSers now view individual opposition to the draft as ineffective and think their past emphasis on draft resistance was a mistake. The draft workshop was a debate between SDSers who favored resistance and those who said that if drafted you should go in the army. The resolution on the military was friendly toward GIs and projected working and organizing in the Army.

Where is SDS Going?

We can project an increase in the factional atmosphere in SDS, with political issues becoming more and more defined in the coming months. At this time there is no organized tendency that can take on Progressive Labor on the Cuban Leadership, Czechoslovakia, black nationalism, Stalin, etc. Although a number of healthy SDSers express dissatisfaction with PL's worker student alliance, no one applied the lessons of France to the role of the student movement in relation to the working class. But, unquestionably, there will be many SDSers frustrated by the developments in SDS and will look for better solutions.

We want to project our ideas into the developing political discussion in SDS and win over those who are revolutionaries. The best way to do this is to continue our campaign to

publicize the French events and our socialist election campaign. Through our regional trailbrazes, we can contact and recruit SDSers on outlying campuses with our revolutionary program of action.

Our Intervention

NEC members Carol L., Syd S., Dan R. and Caroline L. attended the convention as well as seven or eight members of the Detroit local.

Over 400 dollars worth of Socialist literature was sold at our table. We participated in fruitful discussions with many SDSers--both with local leaders like Rudd, Jeff Shero, Steve Halliwell and others as well as rank and file SDSers. Many of us participated in the workshops. 41 SDSers endorsed the campaign and over 25 bought subscriptions to the Young Socialist and the Militant. Generally, we felt there was more interest in the ideas of the YSA than at any previous SDS convention.