

Spring 1969 at Columbia, by Paula Reimers, June 10, 1969

The events at Columbia this spring, while not as dramatic as the events of last spring, are just as important politically. This spring has very vividly highlighted the internal conflicts now racking SDS, and has conclusively demonstrated SDS's inability to relate effectively to the most important political issues of the day.

The political tendencies at Columbia and an approximation of their numerical strength are as follows:

Youth Against War and Fascism - 2, maybe 3

Young People's Socialist League - 3 or 4 active

Progressive Labor - 8 (7 of them brought in, primarily from Boston, in Fall '68)

Students for a Democratic Society has two major factions:

1) "Independents" - grouped around SDS Steering Committee on the issue of opposition to PL - 80 to 100

2) PL-dominated caucus (goes by different aliases, such as SDS Expansion Committee, now disbanded by SDS, and Worker-Student Alliance Caucus) - 15-30

(This caucus varies greatly in numbers. It includes PLers and a varying number of independents who come around them on certain questions, such as opposition to Black self-determination, and tactics, but who do not necessarily accept the PL line as a whole.)

Young Socialist Alliance - 3

The great majority of the students at Columbia are radical. They oppose the war in Vietnam, ROTC, military recruiting on campus. The overwhelming majority support the demands raised by Black students for control of a Black Studies Institute and control of programs "relating to the Black experience at Columbia."

SDS, however, has found it impossible to mobilize this radicalism in any meaningful way. The SDS leadership has been obsessed all year with the necessity of repeating last year's actions, and has repeatedly tried to "spark" the campus in action by ultra-left confrontations, instead of organizing the kind of massive demonstrations that could have involved the majority of students.

SDS has also carried out a very sectarian policy regarding other groups, jealously trying to keep any action under "revolutionary" SDS leadership. It has not attempted to form a united front with other groups on campus; in fact, it has consistently opposed such a united front whenever it was proposed. This in spite of the fact that the Graduate Student Union, the Graduate Sociology Students Union, Students for a Restructured University, all radical groups, opposed ROTC and military recruiting. During the anti-recruiting demonstrations, the YSA intervened, proposing a united front in opposition to

recruiting, and calling for mass demonstrations to attract the largest number of students. This proposal was rejected by the SDS on the grounds that the movement had to be "anti-imperialist" and could not join with liberals "only" opposed to military recruiting.

The main political watershed at Columbia has been the demands of the Black student groups at Columbia and Barnard (Students Afro-American Society at Columbia and the Barnard Organization of Soul Sisters at Barnard) for control over their education, and, in the case of the Black students at Barnard, their living conditions. The YSA issued a number of leaflets which were well-circulated and well-read on campus, declaring its unconditional support for the demands of the Black students and stressing the necessity of Black leadership of the Black struggle. This won the YSA considerable respect among the Black students, as is indicated by the fact that YSAers were asked to speak at some of their rallies. The YSA has close contact and good working relations with both SAS and BOSS. We look forward to recruiting some of the leading members of these organizations to the YSA.

SDS, however, was never able to develop a consistent orientation toward the Black struggle. PL was very vocal in its opposition to the Black students' demands, and was openly racist in its attacks. It called the Black students "reactionary petty-bourgeois nationalists" who were practicing "get-aheadism at the expense of the Black workers," and attacked the Black demands as "segregationism" and "racism in reverse." While the majority of SDS supported the Black students' demands, it was unclear politically why it was doing so. Factional struggles on this question racked every SDS meeting, and were very demoralizing for the rank-and-file SDSers.

The policy of the SDS leadership which supported the Black students was almost entirely opportunist, as was its relationship to the demands of the Black and Puerto Rican high school students. While verbally supporting the right of Black leadership in the Black struggle, SDS in action attempted in every way to co-opt the struggle and bring it under SDS leadership. The ultimate in this opportunism occurred when SDS on April 17 took Philosophy Hall in support of the demand for open admissions - and the SDS demands! This action was taken without the knowledge or consent of SAS, at a time when SAS was holding a teach-in in support of its own demands. Naturally, this opportunism completely alienated the Black students.

The factionalism in SDS went to absurd extremes. On one occasion, members of the SDS Steering Committee and the SDS Expansion Committee held simultaneous rallies at opposite ends of the campus, and ended up shouting epithets at one another over bullhorns.

This combination of sectarianism to other campus groups, opportunism to the Black struggle, and internal factionalism has had disastrous results. No one on campus could tell at any given time what SDS stood for. The effect on the SDS members was very demoralizing. The last SDS action of the year was an utter disaster, with 40 students occupying Mathematics and 100 occupying Fayerweather.

They made no attempt to mobilize campus sentiment in support of the action, and in fact, since no educational work had been done beforehand, it would have been next to impossible to get any real support. The SDSers finally left the buildings after an injunction had been served and the police were on their way.

Arrest warrants were served for thirty of the demonstrators. SDS has made no attempt to rally campus opposition to the use of injunctions to suppress free speech. YSA attempts to mobilize campus sentiment against the injunctions and to defend SDS have met with a hostile reaction from the SDS leadership. SDS rejects any attempts to build a defense on a civil liberties basis, maintaining that civil liberties do not exist for revolutionaries in a capitalist society. They in fact denounce civil liberties as a "liberal farce" and say the only way to defend those under attack is by intensifying the struggle. (This, remember, at a time when sympathy for SDS is at an all time low.)

The political defeat of SDS is now a matter of general campus discussion. Many students who had considered themselves radicals and even revolutionaries had identified with SDS as the best-known radical student organization. These students are still opposed to war, racism, and poverty, still want to change the society we live in. But they must analyze their political beliefs in the light of the lessons of the SDS defeat.

A process of re-groupment of the forces on the left at Columbia is now in progress. Some of the students, it is true, are moving to the right, identifying SDS with revolutionary politics and therefore rejecting revolutionary struggle altogether. But the overwhelming majority, I think, are criticizing SDS from the left, reasserting their dedication to changing this society but trying to find another organization that can change it, for SDS had proved conclusively that it cannot.

One indication of this kind of criticism from the left may be seen in the editorials which have appeared in the campus newspaper, the Columbia Daily Spectator. Spectator generally represents the liberal-to-radical thinking of the vast majority of Columbia students. In an editorial on Monday, May 12, Spectator said that students who wanted to "make radical changes in American society have to regenerate a new movement at Columbia, dissociating themselves from the kind of 'revolutionary adventurism' which SDS exhibited in its take-over of Mathematics and Fayerweather. We asked students to develop alternatives to SDS and turn to new leadership." The editorial was in reply to an editorial in the New York Times, which had used a previous Spectator editorial critique of SDS to implicate the Spectator editors in an attack on the campus left in general. The Times had called upon the "responsible student majority" to "call the would-be professional revolutionaries to order." In response, the Spectator editor says, "But the Times might as well know this: that I am not a part of the 'responsible student majority' and I will not call anybody to order if that means just preserving the existing order."

The YSA is in an excellent position to intervene in this regroupment process. Throughout the year, the YSA has never allowed itself to be considered "another faction" of SDS, and has remained apart from all factional struggles. YSAers speaking in SDS meetings have always identified themselves as YSAers and have never voted in SDS meetings. This guarantees that students looking for alternatives to SDS will consider the YSA for new leadership, as the only political tendency which has consistently agitated for a truly revolutionary perspective.

The YSA has intervened with leaflets on the major political questions, has circulated the MILITANT, and set up literature tables. We also had dormitory meetings and discussions with radical students on the lessons of the SDS defeat. We have the perspective of recruiting some of the more healthy campus revolutionaries to the YSA.