

The SDS's: Desolation Row

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It is now more than six months since SDS died of internal hemorrhaging in Chicago. The remains of SDS which still exist continue to split off from one another and from reality, to the point, where even the ever cautious Guardian has declared that "SDS has ceased to exist." (Jan.17)

But the Guardian, like many ex-SDSers alienated from RYM and WSA, fails to adequately explain the collapse of the national organizational expression of the student left.

SDS died because it, like the student and anti-war movements as a whole, was isolated from the working-class. As SDSers came to the conclusion that they would have to break from the system, they inevitably had to move away from support of left-wing Democrats, federally-aided poverty programs, and other "progressive" programs tied to capitalism. But if reform through the system is not a viable approach, a social force capable of transforming society in a revolutionary manner must be sought.

SDS's search lasted four years and took it through the poor, the blacks, youth, the "new working class," and other vehicles, all of which proved insufficient. Then, about a year ago, all factions of SDS claimed to have adopted some kind of working-class orientation.

But, in fact, none of the SDS tendencies (Weatherman, RYM II, and PL-WSA) base their perspectives on the independent struggle of the working class.

Weatherman has totally given up on the working class; the others have clung to the rhetoric. But the failure to formulate theory and programs capable of linking the anti-war and student movements to workers left SDS separated from the only force capable of implementing its revolutionary slogans. So resolution followed resolution, the revolutionary rhetoric spiraled higher and higher, until the "castles built of matchsticks tumbled into one another" and crumbled.

RU: The Miracle Workers

Late last winter, a new saviour appeared on the crisis-ridden left scene, one with a scheme for building movement unity. The Bay Area Revolutionary Union, in its publication, the Red Papers, forthrightly placed the blame for the fragmentation of the left on "A whole host of Marxist-Leninist-Trotskyist organizations, differing and splintering from each other on almost a daily basis, [who] share a political line and organizational style that sabotages mass struggle."

To meet this threat, the RU had a ready-made solution. Through the miracle of new, improved Marxism-Leninism-Maoism (RU variety) the movement would be cured of sectarianism.

Three months later, our heroes took the first step towards uniting the left by leading the rump caucus that expelled Progressive Labor and the Worker-Student Alliance from SDS. After two months of resting on their laurels, the RU spotted another opportunity to unite the movement, and so RYM-II, the SDS faction in which they were a leading force, split from Weatherman.

After such a splendid job of uniting the left, the RU realized that it needed internal unity, and so turned inward. Immediately, these magicians succeeded in uniting their organization by provoking a split around a truly profound matter: the Black Nation in the South, noted organizing tool of another "Marxist-Leninist" organization, the C.P. USA of the late twenties and early thirties.

Once more free to build movement unity, the RU attended the RYM-II convention in Atlanta on Thanksgiving weekend, just in time to form one faction in a three-way split over whether RYM-II should be a mass organization, a cadre organization, a revolutionary organization, or various combinations and permutations of these categories. For their splendid role, the RU was given no representatives on the RYM-II steering committee.

When last heard from, RU leader Bob Avakian was in Flint, Michigan, attending the SDS National War Council, called by Weatherman. Rumor had it that Avakian was about to pull off the biggest unity success of them all -- and with JJ around, who would deny it?

Weatherman: Fight the People

In the Sept. 12 issue of New Left Notes, Weatherman leader and SDS Educational Secretary Bill Ayres, in "A Strategy to Win", said:
"...if it is a world-wide struggle, if Weatherman is

correct in that basis thing, that the basic struggle in the world today is the struggle of the oppressed people against U.S. imperialism, then it is the case that nothing we could do in the mother country would be adventurist. Nothing we could do because there is a war going on already, and the terms of that war are set."

Later, in the same article, Ayres elaborates:
"But the more I thought about that thing, 'fight the people,' it's not that it's a great mass slogan or anything, but there's something to it."

These two statements neatly summarize Weatherman's theory and practice. To the Weatherman, the international revolution is now raging -- it is a racial struggle, the non-whites being identified as the oppressed and the whites as the oppressors. And the Weathermen place no faith in building an indigenous movement among white Americans. Hence, their conclusion is to wreak as much havoc as possible, to create chaos, to, in Ayres' words, fight the people.

It is not necessary to speculate on the logical extension of this insanity; the Weathermen have already gone that far and then some. For example, at the SDS National War Council, called by Weatherman and held in Flint, Michigan Dec. 27-30, John Jacobs (JJ) declared, "We're against everything that's good and decent."

Bernardine Dohrn spoke at length about Weatherman's new idols: Charles Manson and his followers, the alleged murderers of Sharon Tate and eight others. Weatherman calls the Manson group the "Tate Eight". Bernardine speaks in glowing terms

"Dig it, first they killed those pigs, then they ate dinner in the same room with them, then they even shoved a fork into a victim's stomach; Wild!"

And so Weatherman has taken itself out of the movement. Their hallmark is violence for the sake of violence, and their anti-imperialist rhetoric looks more and more like a front.

The violence, the hatred of workers, the chaos for the sake of chaos, the conscious orientation to "lumpen" elements, these characteristics are all very reminiscent of another movement in another era: Mussolini's Brownshirts and Hitler's Fascists, especially Gregor Strasser's "left" anti-capitalist grouping within Hitler's gang.

These movements, too, arose out of the rage and frustration of oppressed lower middle class groups at the failings of capitalism. Today, the same rage, frustration, and powerlessness can be utilized by the capitalists once again, even in an "anti-capitalist" garb.

Should capitalism enter into a state of real crisis, it will be forced to launch a severe austerity program, thereby bringing itself into direct conflict with the working class. The bourgeoisie, faced with this threat, must find a mass movement to place between itself and the workers. The only source for such a movement lies among beaten-down lumpen and terrified petty bourgeois elements. The bourgeoisie, playing upon the aspirations of people themselves incapable of retaining power, can assume control of a fascist movement and direct it against the working class.

This was the schema in Italy and Germany, where the fascist movements originally had anti-capitalist overtones. Weatherman clearly is capable of walking the same route.

So when it is suggested to Ted Gold of the Weather Bureau that his panorama of the revolution implies fascism in this country before a socialist revolution, he replies: "Well, if it would take fascism, we'll have to have fascism."

Yeah, Ted; but which side will you be on?

PL-WSA: The Wooden Soldiers

Since being "expelled" from SDS, the Worker-Student Alliance Caucus and its Progressive Labor Party leadership have tried to maintain that nothing has changed -- that SDS is still a national organization with WSA still a caucus within it. But SDS is dead, and PLers are too rigid to put anyone on for long.

PL held New York City Regional conferences regularly in September. The first attracted about 500, the early October's regional, only 100 showed up, including

half a dozen International Socialists and about twenty members of the Labor Committee.

Discussion centered on open admissions. The IS and the Labor Committee supported a resolution calling for universal free higher education with stipends for those who need them, daycare centers for students and employees with children, an end to tracking on all levels, time off with pay for workers to take courses, relevant education (black studies, women's studies, labor studies, sex education), and expanded construction of schools on all levels. It was specified that the entire program be paid for by corporations, banks, and real estate speculators.

We considered this program to be typical of an approach. The war and the war economy have caused the current inflation. This inflation has resulted in declining real wages of workers. Nixon's attempt to impose an austerity program on workers to fight the inflation is running up against the GE strike and the rest of the new wave of labor militancy. Arms spending and inflation has at the same time decreased funds available for social services, creating crises in transit, housing, medical care, and education.

Our general program in the light of this must be to demand an end to the war and the war economy, to end the inflation; jobs for all; production for social need, not waste; tax banks and corporations. These demands must be raised in an attempt to link the anti-war movement and the wave of workers' struggles.

The only way for the anti-war movement to end imperialism, and for the workers to combat the austerity program is with a worker-led movement to end the war and the war economy. The anti-war movement as a whole should be directing this analysis toward workers, and pressing them to raise these and the other suggested demands to their union leaders. In this way, the class collaborationist role of union bureaucrats can be exposed.

The relevance of inflation and the war to the open admissions program is that the squeeze on funds available for social services has caused a general funding crisis in education. The open admissions program calls for those who profit from the war and the inflation -- the corporations, banks, and real estate speculators -- to foot the bill. This links up with the general program of ending the arms economy, and we explicitly stated that open admissions is a part of this more general approach.

Open admissions serves as a campus link to the working class; we point out that the war economy must be ended before meaningful programs in education, transit, and the other social services can be funded, and that the war economy can only be ended by a movement led by workers. This analysis is being better received now that the Moratorium has failed to end the war; moreover, the crazy antics of RYM SDS serve to reinforce the understanding that a movement isolated from the working class cannot effect real social change.

PL-WSA's response to the open admissions program was to oppose it on two grounds: 1) It fosters illusions in the working class that capitalism can bring about meaningful change; 2) Education bourgeoisifies the working class.

The first point reflects PL's desire to define who, where, and on what grounds struggle will occur. It is true that capitalism may be able to grant open admissions; but it certainly can't dump the war economy, the larger context of the struggle.

In any event, programs like the one around open admissions will not be won without a struggle from below. In New York City, for example, the promised Open Admissions program is mired in a funding quagmire, for which the Board of Higher Education has no solution. Our proposal for taxing the corporations and banks is the only solution short of soaking the workers again. But this added corporate taxation will only be achieved after a great struggle, if at all. In the course of the struggle, consciousness can and must be injected.

Any demand short of a demand for socialism now can be attacked on the grounds of fostering illusions, of being cooptable over a long term. PL cannot understand the nature of a transitional demand, of the fact that people's consciousness can be raised in the course of a struggle, whether or not they achieve the concrete goal that first impelled them into motion.

PL's second point is sheer rubbish. The current educational system stratifies the working class, more or less reproducing the stratification of the previous generation of workers. When workers struggle against the class domination of the educational system, we must support that struggle and extend it to a struggle against class domination by the capitalists of society in general.

When the vote on the open admissions resolutions was taken, we defeated PL-WSA by about five votes. On a political basis this was not surprising, since their arguments had been totally discredited. What made the vote significant was that this was the first time since the SDS split that PL-WSA had lost a vote of any importance. Realizing that they were facing a crisis, the WSA simply stopped calling regional meetings in New York. This is a more or less typical example of how PL runs its "broad-based student organization."

Later on at the regional, PL introduced its campus program -- the Campus Worker Student Alliance (CWSA). The WSA admitted that last year the worker part of the alliance had been pretty weak, so now they were intent on remedying that by seeking out the workers nearest to them -- campus workers, especially cafe-

neria workers.

Some character from Stony Brook got up and announced that at his school they were leafletting students to clean off the cafeteria tables after they finished eating. You may not believe it, but that comment was not atypical.

The CWSA is a truly strange phenomenon. Looking through the Nov. 15 New Left Notes (Boston edition), we find that the demand at Berkeley is \$2.75/hr., the demand at Northeastern is \$2.50/hr., the demand at Rhode Island is that workers not be forced to wear name tags, and that workers be provided with gloves to prevent them from being burned in the cafeteria.

These demands are characteristic of a campaign blending strong strains of economism and moralism. Their approach is moralistic because, instead of providing an analysis of society and the university (which could yield transitional demands to link the student and working class movements such as open admissions), PL preaches to students that they should support workers because their hands get burned. Rather than pointing to the power of the working class, PL plays on sympathy.

The demands are economist because PL tells students to only relate to campus workers, thereby abstracting the struggle of campus workers from the general struggle of the working class. Further, PL even atomizes campus workers into discrete campus bundles, and makes different wage and working condition demands for different campuses. This turns the attention of workers away from their fellow workers in different schools and factories, and serves to divide the working class.

Where will WSA go? Their seriousness has managed to attract many good kids. But the constant blunting and dulling of political discussion, the total rigidity, turns WSAers into virtual political automatons. Many would probably break from PL if confronted with a coherent, rational alternative. PL realizes this, and, as we saw above, does its best to prevent this from occurring.

The WSA is still strong in New England, but is scattered everywhere else. Their Christmas NC, originally scheduled for the Mid-West, was transferred to New Haven, Connecticut. About 500 attended. Open admissions was defeated by 400-3, but neither IS nor the Labor Committee was there to push it.

WSA will probably erode slowly in New England, as students eventually become disillusioned with authoritarianism, anti-intellectualism, and no visible programmatic results. Another sudden change in the PL line, such as last year's zig-zag on nationalism and black studies, will probably lead to significant defection.

In any event, PL-WSA seems destined to stagnate, isolated both from the campus and from a class analysis of American society.

RYM2 and the Workers

Just over a year ago, a curious, poorly-reasoned document by then-SDS national secretary Mike Klonsky appeared, entitled "Revolutionary Youth Movement". (RYM) It argued that the primary contradiction in the world is between U.S. imperialism and the Third World, rather than the traditional Marxist view that it is between wage-labor and capital.

Two factions subsequently emerged in RYM. Weatherman, the renowned band of adventurists who openly proclaim the reactionary nature of the American working class; and RYM-II, which claims to have a working class orientation. By playing on the lunacy of Weatherman, RYM-II has managed to pose as the calm rational revolutionaries with the true class perspective. In this manner, they have attracted many SDSers disgusted with PL's rigidity and Weatherman's insanity.

At its Thanksgiving national meeting in Atlanta, three factions emerged in RYM-II. Basically, the disagreement was over whether RYM-II should be a mass revolutionary organization, a mass anti-imperialist organization, or a cadre organization. In addition, the Bay Area Revolutionary Union, one of the factions, wanted to stop using the term "white skin privilege".

The white skin privilege approach argues that white workers, being better paid and more fully employed than non-white workers in this country, are being bribed by imperialist profits, and that the way to unite the working class is for white workers to renounce these privileges, support the demands of blacks in this country, and support the Third World Revolution.

The RU now wants to drop the slogan (which the RU itself originated), but continues to proclaim that the basis for organizing white workers should be calling for support of the black liberation struggle. Hence, the RU is in fact merely making a stylistic change. It is the slogan's content which we must analyze.

In general, RYM-II, in seeing the primary contradiction as being between the U.S. and the Third World, seeks first to win workers to support the struggles of Third World movements. Hence, it starts with the perspective of the Third World, not with a working class perspective. And so RYM-II goes to the workers telling them to give up privileges and to support somebody else's struggle as a pre-condition to struggling themselves.

Workers won't be convinced by moralistic abstractions about the need to fight imperialism and combat racism; these slogans will only become real when injected in the course of workers' struggles. White workers, for example, should support preferential demands of black workers. But they won't do this if it means

their jobs. The key is to urge white workers to fight around demands such as more jobs, for all, to insure that white workers don't get laid off when more blacks are hired.

The same analysis holds for convincing workers of the need to fight imperialism and demand immediate withdrawal from Vietnam. Many workers are convinced that if the war were to end soon, there would be a severe economic crisis and massive unemployment in this country. They won't oppose the war in large numbers until the left can provide an alternative. We can, but RYM-II never has.

If we have any hopes of winning workers to the anti-war movement, we must explain that the war and the war economy are responsible for the current inflation, and the inflation has caused a decline in real wages.

Again, the issues that we should be raising are an end to the inflation by ending the war and the war economy; conversion of the system to provide jobs for all and production for social need instead of for death and waste; to carry out the conversion, we advance a program of eliminating war profits by taxing the corporations and banks. And we should be urging the formation of a party of working people independent of the capitalist parties, as the best vehicle for forwarding these demands outside the shop floor.

RYM II says nothing about this, but this is the perspective that follows when we begin with an analysis of the working class in present social and economic conditions. Carl Davidson and Bob Kirkman of New York RYM II argue against calling for jobs for all on the grounds that it "detracts from the fight against white skin privilege". This clarifies their position. They're reformists.

Revolutionary socialists don't begin by accepting the status quo and then reappportioning it. We realize that we must go beyond the bounds of the current economic system; hence, we put forward simultaneously preferential hiring for blacks and jobs for all. Linking these two demands, we are fighting for a reapportionment of the pie, but of a new and larger pie, so that everyone gets a larger slice.

Developments since the SDS Convention bring into question whether there is anything more than rhetoric behind RYM-II's "working class" approach. The discussion above on white-skin privilege shows that RYM II begins with the perspective of the Third World, not of the international proletariat, which leads to the pre-conditions they impose (of support for the NLF, the Panthers, and a host of other groups) before white workers can make demands of their own.

This static approach was illustrated again last month at a RYM regional in New York, when the IS presented a resolution on the GE strike calling on RYM to attempt to link the anti-war movement to the strike, based on the analysis of the effect of the war economy and inflation on workers presented above. Weatherman, of course, opposed the resolution because it talked about workers. Mad Dog, a bunch of relatively sane ex-Weathermen (relative to Weatherman; objectively, the Mad Dogs are totally insane) opposed it because it talked about imperialist workers.

RYM II, though, claimed to critically support it because, after all, it talked about workers and they have a working class analysis. Unfortunately, in giving critical support they spoke and voted against the resolution on the white-skin privilege grounds.

What makes one even more dubious about RYM II's "working class approach" is their failure to understand how relationship to production affects consciousness. Bruce Franklin, RYM II and Bay Area RU leader, writes: "... Why is a knife grinder or a tinker or a porter or a beggar or a discharged soldier or even a discharged jailbird a member of some other class, the lumpenproletariat, sharply differentiated from the industrial proletariat? It cannot be just a question of values, because to the true proletarian 'law, morality, religion' are just 'bourgeois prejudices'. And it cannot be a question of personal relation to the means of production, because in that case any worker who becomes unemployed would automatically become a member of the lumpenproletariat and the industrial reserve army would be a lumpen-army." ("Lumpenproletariat and Revolutionary Youth," Monthly Review, Jan. 1970, pp. 13-14)

Very glib. What Bruce either does not understand, never learned, or chooses to forget is that socialists do not orient to the working class because of their intelligence or lack of it; nor because of their social grades or lack of them; nor because of their theoretical understanding or lack of it.

We orient to the working class because it is the only class capable of restructuring society to be run by and in the interests of the overwhelming majority of the population. They can do this because of their social weight, because of their position in society, because of their relationship to production. And it is in the struggles that develop around this relationship, between workers and their exploiters, that consciousness of the working class as a class for itself develops.

So when a worker becomes unemployed, his relation to production changes immediately, but his consciousness does not. Of course, the longer he remains unemployed, the longer he is isolated from his fellow workers, the greater the change in his consciousness and hence in his class position. When the working class movement is strong, sectors of the unemployed and the industrial reserve army will orient toward this movement. But when that movement is divided, these groupings can orient away from and even into direct opposition to workers.

In Germany, of the early thirties, for example, large numbers of unemployed workers swelled the fascist movement and helped it to successfully attack the institutions of the workers.

Later, Bruce writes:

"In the United States, unemployed white youth are a fertile breeding place for the worst forms of racism, national chauvinism and the cult of the super-male. This is particularly true in the South, in the urban areas into which the dispossessed rural whites have been driven, and in European-ethnic neighborhoods.

"And among these people there is no clear dividing line between lumpenproletariat and white working class. The Young Patriots and the Young Partisans have shown that these people are capable of becoming not only revolutionaries, but revolutionary leaders. And the only way for them to do this, as both groups have shown, is by organizing around the principle of serving the most oppressed and exploited people in American society." (Ibid., p. 25)

Again, there is no understanding of class. There may be no clear dividing line between the workers and the lumpen in the pool hall or at the drive-in; but that's precisely what makes it impossible to organize at these places.

The dividing line becomes a lot clearer when we look at it from the point of view of production; young workers are inextricably drawn into the union and into some level of understanding of their exploitation. By allying with their fellow workers in the shop and the plant, they are a real social force. Allying with their lumpen friends in the pool hall, they're a gang, at the mercy of the cops.

The Patriots have shown that some lumpen elements can be reached; however, their effect has been neither massive nor sustained over a long period. If they can link up with a movement of workers, a group which can demonstrate its strength, they may have some success. Otherwise, they're destined to fragment, like every other movement of this type.

As far as "organizing around the principle of serving the most oppressed and exploited people in American society", that's wrong and it reveals the false nature of RYM II's "working class approach". The American working class is not the most oppressed group in this country. "Lumpen elements" without a doubt are far worse off. The same was true in Marx's time. But nevertheless, the analysis presented earlier that the working class is the only force capable of leading the struggle for power against the bourgeoisie and structuring a socialist society holds true.

The confusion between lumpen and workers is again illustrated by Bruce when he speaks of the need to spread the revolutionary youth movement to young white working people. He outlines three areas of work: in the army, among street gangs, and in the high schools. These are seen as the three most vital areas of organizing for the revolutionary youth movement, which Bruce earlier refers to as the principal organizing concept in the mother country (that means white America).

But then what sense is there in referring to RYM II's approach as working class? There are kids from working class backgrounds in the army and in high schools, and they are important places at which to organize. But there are workers in neither. A working class movement can only be built among workers. Movements in the army, in high schools and community colleges, etc., can only have a working-class character when they are part of a movement led by workers.

Franklin's inability to distinguish lumpen from worker may be more than accidental. On p. 18 of the article, he writes: "There is only one group that not only shares the degradation of the world's revolutionary masses, but is sufficiently concentrated to attack imperialism at home -- the urban lumpenproletariat." (Ibid., p. 18)

As we have seen, Franklin begins with the perspective of the Third World. Therefore, it is natural that he looks for groupings in this country corresponding in a material sense to Third World people. These forces are as incapable of structuring a socialist society in this country as they are in the Third World. Without workers' leadership, a minority bureaucratic leadership always has and always will be able to control a movement and ultimately a regime from the top down.

In this country however, unlike the Third World, capitalism is strong enough to buy off or otherwise co-opt any movement not led by workers themselves. It is a question of two forces -- the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

The proletariat can stop society at the point of production, as the French workers demonstrated in 1968. The lumpen and middle classes, having no means of affecting the functioning of society, must ultimately orient to either the working class or the capitalists. It is important to win these strata -- but it must be done on a class basis, based on the leadership of the proletariat.

The program which RYM II is following nationally is consistent with Franklin's theoretical mouthings. Rhetorically, they're for the workers. In practice, they oppose almost every working class action on the basis of the white skin privilege line.

They direct most of their propaganda to lumpen elements and declassé youths. They confuse street gangs with young workers. But primarily, they begin with the perspective simply of support for the Third World rather than building a movement based on the working class. From that, as we have seen, everything else follows.