

Report on Berkeley SDS Regional Conference by Alan Wald and Peter Graumann, July 12-13, 1969

The SDS regional conference in Berkeley was very clearly the organ of the Progressive Labor- Worker-Student Alliance (PL-WSA) faction. PL-WSA proclaimed at the conference that the Revolutionary Youth Movement (RYM) faction had been invited to participate and present its views in open debate, but the RYM people never appeared.

The conference was designed with a rigorous agenda, beginning with a report on the Chicago SDS Convention by the new inter-organizational secretary, Pat Forman. This was followed by two days of panels and workshops on racism, women's liberation, regional organizing, etc. The authors of this report only attended the first day and did not participate in the conference. The YSA organizationally intervened through MILITANT sales during registration, but met with little success.

Approximately 100 people attended; about 2/3 seemed to be PL-WSA and their sympathizers. There were also about 15-20 members of the Independent Socialist Clubs (ISC), and 4 or 5 from the Spartacist League. A few independents sympathized with those who had walked out of the Chicago convention, and some were neither PL nor WSA but supported them in the split.

The conference was an attempt by PL-WSA to consolidate itself and move forward as "the" SDS. Free copies of the new NEW LEFT NOTES (from Boston) were distributed along with a leaflet, "Build the Year-Round Work-In!" Opposing SDS tendencies also joined in with a plethora of leaflets. There was a reproduction of Carl Davidson's anti-PL article from THE GUARDIAN. A leaflet from the "Joe Hill Caucus, S.F. State SDS, and RSU Berkeley" claimed that PL had denounced the S.F. State strike, actively opposed the struggle for People's Park, and had failed to "develop a worker-student alliance." The ISC handed out a leaflet called "What's Going On Here?" declaring that they had been undemocratically denied a seat on the panel discussions to be held during the conference. The Spartacists wrote up their view that the SDS split had been a "left-right" one, and that the "left" (PL-WSA) must now go "Trotskyist." Inside, there were literature tables set up by PL, The Resistance, ISC, the Spartacists, and WSA.

The conference began with a discussion of the ISC complaint that they had been "excluded" from participating in the panels, and the ISC submitted a double motion that (1) they and the Spartacists be allowed to participate as they are significant tendencies in SDS, and (2) that there be a panel with workshops on the working class. There were speakers from both sides and PL-WSA charged that (1) ISC and the Spartacists had not been major tendencies in SDS, and (2) this kind of "formal democracy" of allowing them to sit on panels would mean that "anyone -- including the YSA, CP, and the Firemen's Union" could likewise demand a representative. ISC pointed out that since the panels would have four speakers, and since RYM had not shown up, and since "the YSA, CP and the Firemen's Union" were not there, the exclusion of ISC and the Spartacists would leave only one point of view on the panel. The ISC proposal was voted down, by about 2/3rds to 1/3rd.

The report on the Chicago convention was then given, followed by an open discussion. It became very clear during this discussion how seriously the "National-Office Collective" had torpedoed the convention: even anti-PLers refused to support the Klonsky-Dohrn maneuvers. PL emerged (by comparison) as the non-sectarian wing -- after all, RYM is purging people right and left, while "anyone" can join "our" SDS! PL-WSA didn't even have to get excited or put themselves out in the discussion, although this was also due to the fact that they had a mechanical majority. They came off as very smooth, "open" and willing to confront all opponents in political debate. (Excluding the ISC and Spartacists from the panels did not prohibit them from participating in the general discussions.)

The Spartacists gave "critical support" to PL's faction in the name of "Trotskyism." The ISC found itself a bit cramped -- having first to denounce PL, then the "National Office Collective," and finally getting to their third camp position just as their time was running out.

Other sessions followed the same general pattern: PL-WSA positions were dominant by virtue of their numerical strength and the oppositions' political weakness. PL put forward their notions about "expansionism" being a major focus for campus action, that the "Summer Work-In" must be extended to the "Year-Round Work-In," in order to get the students into the factories, and that "open admissions" was a bad demand because the workers and Third World peoples would become "bourgeoisified" if they became students. Their alternative in this third area was that SDS should fight to get Third World people more jobs on campus.

In one of the workshops a comrade posed the Red University concept as an alternative to this, and it seemed to be effective with independents -- especially two Chicanos who charged PL with racism because they were saying that Third World people weren't good enough to be students but only janitors. These two, plus one black woman, were the only Third World people attending the conference.