

NEC Report on the SDS National Council Meeting -- January 12, 1968

The National Council meeting and educational conference held by Students for a Democratic Society in Bloomington, Indiana, December 27-31, marked a turn by SDS toward greater participation in the antiwar movement's actions and organizations. The National Council meeting, which was almost equal in size (about 400 people) to last summer's convention, began to confront the political impact of the Vietnam war on American society, an issue SDS has previously avoided. The Council meeting was more serious and less "hippy" than other recent national SDS gatherings.

Under the general motif of establishing "a national program" the Council decided, among its most important decisions, to call ten days of antiwar activity, April 20-30, to send a representative to the National Mobilization Committee and to support an antiwar action at the Democratic Party convention. SDS's formal decision to send a representative to the NMC has also led in practice to participation and consultation between SDS and the SMC.

These decisions stand in sharp contrast to national SDS's previous abstention from the antiwar movement. As a national organization SDS remained aloof from both the April 15 and October 21 mobilizations until the very last minute.

The underlying reasons for this turn emerged at the National Council meeting. Through discussions and position papers it is clear that SDS 1) feels threatened by the growth of the SMC, 2) feels the impact of the antiwar movement and the mass sentiment it reflects, and 3) feels the impact of the Vietnamese who evidently placed high premium on massive actions and on maintaining the antiwar coalition, and who expressed these attitudes to those SDSers who recently traveled to Vietnam and Czechoslovakia.

The threat they felt from the SMC was the most well articulated. Delegates took the floor explaining that SMC is not a paper organization, that the SMC has chapters on campuses where SDS ought to have chapters, and that many SDS chapters look to the SMC NO for national direction rather than to the SDS NO.

Over 80 cities were represented, with about an equal number of voting delegates. The rest of the 400 attendance came from local SDS chapters and various other radical tendencies. In contrast to the last convention the Draperites were not heavily represented and exerted little influence. There was a notable absence of "old-timer" SDSers, such as Kissinger, Boothe, and Oglesby. Steve Max of New York did attend and chaired the major sessions, which has almost become an SDS tradition. There was heavy representation from New York and the Midwest, and good West Coast representation.

The Calvert grouping (Davidson, Spiegel, McCarthy, Wilkerson, Halliwell, Eanet, etc.), which emerged as the SDS leadership at the last convention, most clearly understands what the key

National Council decisions mean. The national grouping is groping toward a program and more defined role for SDS in relation to the rest of the left. Calvert, Davidson, and others tried to prepare the NC discussion by writing position papers and publishing them in New Left Notes in advance of the meeting, and by organizing an educational conference on SDS's role and perspectives preceding the National Council meeting.

While this marked an advance over pure "participatory democracy," many of the delegates saw the leadership trying to impose a program on the entire organization. That is to say, many SDSers still resisted antiwar involvement and opposed the Calvert clique's domination of SDS.

Three different proposals were put forward on the important discussion of Spring program. First, the Wilkerson-Calvert-Spiegle resolution called for more national direction, participation in the antiwar coalition, and 10 days of protest. Second, the Fuerst-Gottlieb resolution which was friendly to the national leadership, but called for more local autonomy. It represented the empty abstentionist politics of the past -- more sophisticated, but void of any concrete program. Third, the Progressive Labor Party resolution which implicitly called for a united front from below, called for a "worker-student alliance," and the organization of the campuses around the question of student power rather than the war.

The Progressive Labor Party resolution just barely carried in a rather sizeable workshop on national program and thereby challenged the leadership. In the actual plenary the leadership united behind the Fuerst resolution and easily carried. It was clear to Calvert, et al, that by supporting the non-programmatic Fuerst resolution the PL resolution would be soundly defeated and a national program could be salvaged. The Fuerst resolution was then amended by the plenary to include many important points from the Calvert resolution such as the 10 day proposal. (There is an important article by Mike Speigle concerning this debate in the most recent issue of New Left Notes.)

During the Council discussion it became clear that most SDSers identify with the Vietnamese and Cubans, and with the German SDS and the Japanese Zengakuren. The word "anti-imperialist" was very much in vogue. It is clear that many SDSers seriously consider themselves anti-imperialists and SDS as the American anti-imperialist organization. In trying to formulate a national program one thread that went through every resolution was the attempt to relate "local issues" to the issue of ending imperialism.

In adopting such an attitude, several additional questions are raised for SDS. That is, if SDS is anti-imperialist, why isn't it socialist as the German SDS is? By what means is

imperialism to be ended? What social forces are required to accomplish this goal?

Dealing with the latter question, the Spring program resolution pointed to the need to relate actions to the masses of American people, to the working class. This was a continuing theme of discussion at the meeting. Many SDSers still have a primitive understanding of what the working class is, seeing it as either "the poor" or neighborhood gangs. But a few SDSers now see the openings through the antiwar movement to reach the industrial working class -- those with the power to end the war.

Some positive lessons were learned from the recent antiwar and antidraft actions. The National Council decisively rejected the notion of calling the 10 days "Ten Days of Resistance" or "Ten Days that Shook the Empire." Further, much of the discussion was against disruptive actions as a norm.

Other resolutions and decisions were passed that were far less positive. A resolution on JOIN Community Union was put forward to change the name to National Community Union, severing ties with SDS, and requesting almost complete financial support from SDS. A member of JOIN attacked SDS as a middle class organization, aspiring to be radical, and then appealed for money. With much self-flagellation the resolution was carried.

A southern resolution was put forward characterizing the South as a colony of "Yankee imperialism" and pandering to southern regionalist prejudices. This also carried decisively.

A little discussed resolution on the draft was carried, calling draft resistance a "positive alternative" to McCarthy type campaigns. It is interesting to note, though, that there was little discussion on the draft at this conference, when only a year ago draft refusal was SDS's major project. Although it is unlikely that this particular resolution will be implemented, SDS still looks to non-cooperation with the draft as a main activity around which to organize the antiwar movement. We can expect that they will continue to advance individual anti-draft activity.

A proposal for summer organizing along the line of Vietnam Summer was adopted without much discussion.

Other resolutions discussed, but of little importance, were high schools, repression and defense, news and radical press, and women's liberation.

There was very little discussion of the 1968 elections. To the extent there was a prevalent mood, it was that national electoral politics are irrelevant. Sentiment at the Council meeting was overwhelmingly against McCarthy, so much so that the CP did not even try to state its opinion on the matter.

The SWP campaign received a mixed reaction. A movie of "Stop the Draft Week" in which Fred was identified as the SWP candidate received both hisses and shouts of "Go Fred." Our election material was received with a minimum of interest; six endorsers signed. There was no discussion of the third ticket possibility, although if one begins to develop, it is sure to receive support from many SDSers.

A high point of the meeting was an address by Arthur Kinoy, the ACLU attorney, on the subject of repression and defense. His message was that the government is seeking means to attack the antiwar movement and the movement must defend itself in a united fashion. This was received well by the SDSers, indicating that they are beginning to recognize the need to legally defend themselves. But Kinoy also appealed to the backward prejudices of the SDSers. He made it sound as if a mammoth attack on the movement was imminent. He did not concretely define what he meant by a united defense. Nor did he adequately spell out that "aggressive" defense tactics means legal "aggressive" defense tactics.

Virtually every radical youth group was present at the council meeting. There were a half dozen YSAers, one of whom was a delegate. YAWF put on a major national effort and had more than 15 of their members present (no delegates). They sought a national resistance movement but succeeded in alienating most participants. The "revolutionary contingent" and other ultra-left groups from New York also attended, but had little influence. Vietnam Summer and the NCNP had several people present, who lobbied for an SDS summer project of the Vietnam Summer variety.

Three people from SMC (Kipp Dawson, Linda Morse and Phyllis Kalb) attended. While SDSers see SMC as a competitor, the SMC received a friendly response, in contrast to the hissing of Linda Morse at the 1967 convention.

The Communist Party was sparsely represented, with none of their national leaders present. Their position is relatively isolated in SDS with their two or three spokesmen virtually ignored by the plenary. The CP put forward a position paper on "black-white unity" of the NCNP variety, which received no attention.

Progressive Labor Party had 20-30 people. Their fraction, the largest they have ever had at an SDS national gathering, was led by Levin from San Francisco, Silbar from Chicago, Gordon from New York, and Israel from Boston who was their floor leader. They had about 12-15 votes at the conference. It is clear that PLP has recruited in Boston and San Francisco especially. PLP is generally disliked by the SDSers, but individual PLPers do carry some weight in presentations.

While PLP appears to be growing within SDS, their position is opposed to SDS's current direction. One of the most heated discussions was whether SDS should send a representative or an observer to NMC meetings, with SDS leaders supporting the former, PLP the latter. The SDS leaders' position carried, and PLP exposed to the more political SDSers their line of complete opposition to any form of work with other tendencies or groups.

Our literature table was one of the most successful. Over \$160 worth was sold, primarily of the Che books and the new Mandel pamphlet.

The shift in SDS's approach presents the SMC with new opportunities. Relations between the organizations up to now have been somewhat less than friendly. At the two previous SMC conferences SDS took an aloof attitude, refusing to join in the projected activities. At this juncture, though, the SDS leadership assumes that their ten days of activity will be the same as the SMC's and that they will be jointly coordinated. In Chicago a conference has already been called by SMC, SDS, and other groups to discuss the nature of the spring actions and the Democratic Party convention demonstration. Although SDS is far from homogeneous, it is important that the Chicago developments be emulated in other areas. If the spring actions are jointly organized in ad hoc or existing formations, including SDS, a more permanent broadening of the student antiwar movement will become possible.

After recent national SDS gatherings, the YSA has pointed out in the YS, meetings, and informal discussions that they were retreating from the central issue of American politics. Our response was to demand that they take part in the antiwar movement.

Although some of the leadership consciously understands many of the reasons for the change in SDS's position and its political significance, SDS is an organization without a consistent program or political direction. It reacts to the world around them and it reacts to political events and social conditions. Without a revolutionary socialist program, it reacts incorrectly many times with retreat and abstentionism. That is what SDS has been doing for the past few years since the original SDS march on Washington. Its recent move in the correct direction is a very unstable one as yet. Their present position is not totally thought out; it represents an adaptation to a new relationship of forces and is understood and accepted (or not accepted) differently in various areas; but it is something that we warmly welcome. We want to work with SDS through existing coalitions and structures and through new ad hoc formations to build upcoming actions.

We also welcome their greater identification with anti-imperialism, and we have a lot to talk with them about on this issue. Especially, we want to explain the anti-imperialist actions of the antiwar movement and what a programmatically anti-imperialist organization should do in relation to the antiwar movement. We now have a greater opportunity nationally to recruit directly to the YSA from SDS.