

Letter to New Left Notes: For a Transitional Program - Worker Student Alliance

The essential revolutionary quality of the SDS Worker-Student Alliance has been its working-class orientation, as opposed to the petty-bourgeois guerilla politics of the RYM splitters. However, this working-class orientation has so far been confined to a simplistic, empirical level. The working class is pictured as merely another "ally", although a powerful ally, for the furtherance of the student "anti-imperialist" movement. In the words of John Pennington, SDS National Secretary:

More important, we must continue building a movement with the ideas and practice that can lead to really changing this society. Students can't do it alone. Even if we shut down every college, that wouldn't get the U.S. out of Vietnam. But if steel or transportation workers, for example, struck against the war, the businessmen who run things would tremble! This same class, the very rich, run universities and use them precisely to help them make money! To defeat them, students must ally with working people against our common enemy, the businessmen and their government. (from "Build a Militant Alliance with Campus Workers!", NLN, 1 Nov. 1969).

Thus the Marxist conception of the central and vanguard role of the working class in the destruction of capitalism has become blurred in the conception of an anti-imperialist "ally" to "fight racism" and "get the U.S. out of Vietnam now".

Need Political Consciousness

This blurring of the central role of the proletariat has distorted the Worker-Student Alliance. The historical task of Marxists has been to make the working class conscious of its historical task and give it leadership. Ironically, the WSA (now the CWSA) is attempting to do just the opposite, by simply restricting student involvement to support of campus workers' trade union grievances (low pay, speed-up, arbitrary lay-offs, etc.) An example:

At one school a worker had a heart attack due to speed-up. At another, a worker slipped on a greasy floor and was almost hurt... In each case we could have made an issue of what was happening, but haven't yet!... If people slip on the kitchen floor in the cafeteria and break their bones, is this so insignificant? Demand rubber mats. (Pennington, NLN, 1 Nov. 1969)

To be sure, we must support these limited struggles over abuses. The task of socialists, however, is not to simply aid the spontaneous struggles of the workers; it is always to raise the political consciousness of the system which oppresses us by injecting political demands. As Lenin wrote:

The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only a trade union consciousness, i. e., the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers, and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labor legislation, etc. The theory of socialism, however, grew out of the philosophic, historical and economic theories elaborated by educated representatives of the propertied classes, by intellectuals...

Since there can be no talk of an independent ideology formulated by the working masses themselves in the process of their movement, the only choice is—either bourgeois or socialist ideology... Hence, to belittle the socialist ideology in any way, to turn aside from it in the slightest degree means to strengthen the bourgeois ideology. There is much talk of spontaneity. But the spontaneous development of the working-class movement leads to its subordination to bourgeois ideology...; for the spontaneous working-class movement is trade unionism... and trade unionism means the ideological enslavement of the workers to the bourgeoisie. Hence, our task, the task of Social Democracy, is to combat spontaneity, to divert the working-class movement from this spontaneous, trade-unionist striving to come under the wing of the bourgeoisie, and to bring it under the wing of revolutionary Social Democracy. (Lenin, What Is To Be Done? 1902. emphasis added in last sentence.)

While the CWSA propaganda has been full of phrases about "imperialism" and so forth, the actual demands put forward in support of campus workers have been solely trade union issues as mentioned above (even the issue of racism has been reduced to a trade union problem of "low pay"!). The low political level of the WSA has also been reflected in a mechanical attempt to restrict student action to the campus, thus cutting SDS off from possibly more radical workers (such as the striking GE workers, who are ripe for political consciousness).

Ironically, while the CWSA has been limited to trade union issues, it has too often been presented as the GRAND STRATEGY for opposing the war and racism, and for developing roots in the working class; in fact, it can only be a tactic for demonstrating our working-class orientation. We cannot expect to immediately recruit large numbers of workers, even on campus (geographical closeness does not necessarily mean political closeness), but we can begin to inject the vitally needed political consciousness into the working-class struggle and lay the basis for deeper roots.

Arrogance?

Is this "arrogance" and "elitism", as some have charged? No! Just the reverse—he is arrogant who encourages the lowest possible forms of struggle only, on the excuse that, "the workers aren't ready" for more political struggle. This implies that workers can't understand their own political interests. We say they can. It is a crime for socialists to consciously withhold their knowledge of capitalist society and pander to bourgeois trade union ideology in the workers' movement.

"But is this the proper role for SDS, a student movement?" some ask. This question is posed as if students were a homogeneous group separate from the workers, and with different interests than the wor-

kers. In fact, students are a multi-layered group in transition, and represent, in the bulk, an equivocal force which can tend toward fascism, communism, or neutrality. SDS-WSA is a student-based pro-working class organization of socialists, and hence has an obligation to aid in the politicization of the working class.

Program

The highest form of the worker-student alliance is, and always has been, the revolutionary vanguard party, which unites students and intellectuals who have broken ties with their class origins together with advanced workers in a common organization with a single revolutionary socialist program. SDS is not such a Leninist vanguard party, but SDS can and should become an organization where revolutionary youth—workers and students—can struggle for a common program which attempts to win the working class to revolutionary politics. Such a worker-student alliance would necessarily seek out the most militant and potentially radical workers in as many places as possible. Through them, SDS would help create an organized nucleus in the working class for the propagation—from within the unions—of a highly conscious revolutionary program. This would be infinitely more valuable than exhausting ourselves by simply supporting the minor skirmishes between campus workers and the university.

The way to such a worker-student alliance lies through application of a transitional program. This program attracts militant workers to positions that can only be won through struggle against the capitalists and their state, yet are clearly felt needs of masses of workers today, such as the need for a shorter work week at no loss in pay. This course of action leads through struggle for immediate needs—some of which are unobtainable under capitalism—to a political consciousness of the capitalist system as the main enemy. An example: to win their strike, the GE workers must shut down war production as well as other production, thus breaking militantly with the social-patriotic practices of existing labor leadership. We should encourage the most militant workers who are coming forward now to raise a demand against GE's war contracts, and eventually, against the war itself, as part of the strike struggle. Each step leads directly to the next, and the whole process forms a natural transition between trade union consciousness and revolutionary consciousness.

This can only happen if revolutionaries like SDS take the initiative in pressing for these demands at the right time; if we merely support existing demands and make no attempt to raise consciousness, we are supporting the limitedness of the struggle, and thus betraying our own socialism and the workers we claim to support.

Such a transitional program should include the following:

- 1) Immediate and Unconditional Withdrawal of U.S. Troops from Vietnam, and all other "overseas commitments", including a struggle for political strikes against the war. (Down with phony anti-war bombast by labor bureaucrats like Harry Bridges!)
- 2) Break from the Two Capitalist Parties—Build an Independent Working-class Party! This would necessitate a sharp struggle against the reformist trade union bureaucracy, which is tied to the bosses' "two party" system.
- 3) For a Shorter Work Week at No Loss in Pay—and Mass Training and Hiring of the Unemployed. Struggle against the special oppression of black workers while raising demands which would unite black and white workers; oppose separatist black nationalism.
- 4) End Attacks on Labor—Repeal All Anti-labor Laws. Fight government intervention in the labor movement, investigation of unions, injunctions against picketing and striking, etc.
- 5) For a Decent Standard of Living For All! Fight for a decent minimum wage for all workers, geared to the cost-of-living, and cost-of-living escalator clauses in union contracts.
- 6) For Rank-and-file Control of the Unions! Militancy depends on democratic control and active participation by the rank-and-file; build caucuses to fight for transitional demands.
- 7) Cops Out of the Ghetto—Support Armed Self-defense. Suppression of black ghettos today will turn into violent attacks on workers' struggles tomorrow; for an armed workers militia!
- 8) Release All Political Prisoners (Chicago eight, Black Panthers, etc.).

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