

There have been many acts of rebellion in the American sixties, and countless scenes of insurgency, but for white radicals, the Students for a Democratic Society has always been the only show in town. Like all political shows, it is both shadowy and substantial, plagued by missed cues and tardy prompts. But SDS still speaks the lines of the young white left in this country. The material of movement is stored in its wings, and the running plays out front reflect that unique collection.

What happened in SDS's convulsive convention last week was not a death rattle but a life struggle. At stake was the survival of the radical sensibility of what used to be called the New Left—until its immediacy overcame its newness.

From the beginning, SDS has been attacked at close quarters for its self-confident, often smug independence from older and wiser heads. The League for Industrial Democracy, a moribund social-democratic (now Humphrey-Democratic) pamphleteering society, expelled SDS as its youth branch for refusing to follow an anti-communist line. Over the years, Trotskyists, communists and the range of left sects have spent much of their energies bad-mouthing the growing SDS organization. But the greatest challenge of all has come from the Progressive Labor Party, which decided four years ago to take over SDS as a youthful base for power.

To an untrained eye, PL people look much like their SDS counterparts. Although there are fewer beards, shorter hair and straighter clothes seen in PL caucuses than in SDS ones, the differences in appearance are not enormous. Distinctions begin to grow on the level of attitude and style: against SDS types, PL cadres seem mechanistic and dour, with a tone more suited to the street-corner than the street.

But the real clash comes in terms of basic views of how the world works (or doesn't). SDS people seem intuitively to recognize the variety of insurgency in the US, and while they may prefer some kinds to others, they feel a bond with the insurgents and attempt to fit their politics to a wide range of needs. Beneath all the definitions of line and strategy, SDS has always had the ability to look at radicals in their movements and say: "Us." The black rebellion, women's liberation, culture freakdom, workers' struggles, students' strikes, GI demonstrations: obviously, some must be more strategic than others, but all have a reality that PL seems determined to overlook.

PL derives its ideology not from its experience up against the American empire but (it often seems) from a detailed study of late-nineteenth-century Europe combined with an analysis of the wall posters in East-is-Red Square. No doubt post-industrial capitalism in the US has something in common with German and Russian society in the time of the kaisers and czars. Doubtless, too, the American Movement can learn a great deal from the development of the Chinese revolution, the most cataclysmic political event in the history of the modern world. But there is more to fighting the empire than the application of a labor metaphysic and a position on the Sino-Soviet split. PL peoples a Tolkien middle-earth of Marxist-Leninist hobbits and orcs, and speaks in a runic tongue intelligible only to such creatures. It is all completely consistent and utterly logical within its own confines. But that land, at last, is fantasy. The real world begins where PL ends.

PL has inherited many of the worst traits of the old left and only a few of its virtues, but it is not its ideology and derivative politics that give the most trouble: there's enough wrong-thinking all around in every part of the Movement. What is so destructive is the way in which the doctrine is applied. For some time now, PL has been organizing young people into its Worker-Student Alliance caucuses inside SDS chapters. Trained by and responsive to PL, the WSA members divert much of the organization's energy from outside action to internal hassling. Because of its emphasis on working-class revolution—and its own rigid definition of what that class is and how it functions—PL discourages support of the Black Panthers, of organizations of black workers, of black and brown community control campaigns, of anti-racist protests on campus, of Cuba and the NLF, of "people's parks," of women's liberation organizations—in short, all the activities that the Movement finds most important and attractive.

SDS has been fighting hundreds of local skirmishes with PL since the "take-over" process began, and in a few areas—Boston and the Berkeley campus, for two—the Movement tradition has lately been very much on the defensive. PL overwhelms newly politicized students with its sophisticated Marxism-Leninism on the one hand, and its simple promises of workable "work-in" programs on the other. It proclaims the inevitability of revolution in America given conditions now at hand. Like Calvin's state of grace, PL's state of socialism requires patience for salvation, not sacrifice for action (although both Calvinists and PL people feel a curious urge to work in spite of its irrelevance). In that, PL denies the central existential agony at the core of the Movement of this generation.

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part of the Third World opposition, it could eventually bring down the imperial system; the role of white radicals is primarily (although importantly) supportive and extensive.

Second, the way in which the various foreign and domestic colonies arrive at the revolutionary stage is through their own fights for "self-determination." Of course, the nature of that process is vastly different in Vietnam and black America, but in both cases the colonized community must become conscious of its own identity: that is, blacks will organize themselves separately from whites, and form whatever alliances they need on their own terms.

Third, the youth movement did not spring full-blown from abstract idealism, but is a specific response to the black movement and the worldwide war against the American empire: it must now reach out of its middle-class origins to a base in the white working-class and the permanent drop-out culture—without giving up what it has already done to organize students at all the "best" schools. For as the lower classes come increasingly up against the system (often symbolized by police or military authorities), they can move to fight it more surely than the "privileged" students higher up on the class ladder. Strategically, work should concentrate on building city-wide movements, based on intensive youth organizing across a whole range of issues.

Fourth, the several community "movements" should begin to think of themselves as cadres and collectives in the first stages of formation of a revolutionary political party.

In concept, Weatherman's chief distraction seemed to be in its specific reference to PL ideology. It was written in Aesopian style: each section meant something in itself, and another thing in reaction to PL. The treatment of the idea of black people in the US as a "caste" and a "colony" contained an implicit reference to PL's notion that blacks have no functional quality outside their "class" condition as super-exploited workers. The emphasis on the Third World was specifically aimed at PL's arrogant, carping criticism of the Vietnamese and Cuban revolutions.

Weatherman's ideological point-making did not grow out of an intellectual construct (as PL ideology does), but from the real concerns of SDS organizers—in their local fights with PL as well as their organizing work. PL has frustrated SDS's attempts to develop and energize the anti-war movement around the identification its members feel with the NLF. In the same way, the document tried to justify the natural inclination of SDS people to ally with the Black Panthers (and counterpart Chicano groups, such as the Young Lords in Chicago)—against the opposition of PL, which finds both the Panthers and the Lords guilty of "chauvinistic nationalism." There was some attempt—not very complete—to integrate women's liberation into the theoretical whole; for it is a movement that SDS people now find immensely important. The idea of city-wide, neighborhood-based youth organizing comes out of the Action Faction's work in the cities and campuses of Ohio, and similar operations in the New York and New Jersey area.

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"racist" notion that blacks cannot arrive at their own independent politics. PL's Jeff Gordon and a wedge of supporters seized the platform. The noise level in the hall rose to new peaks of intensity, along with the tension. Mark Rudd moved to recess for the evening, and when that motion failed, the SDS walk-out began. As the delegates left, PL's cheerleaders began their last chant: "No split, no split, no split, no split!"

Somewhat less than half the people in the meeting hall filed into the dark, dusty sports arena next door, and arranged themselves in rows of bleachers. SDS security guards were posted at the passageway connecting the adjoining rooms. No one then had the slightest idea of how the walk-out would resolve itself, but some kind of order in the "caucus" was assembled, and speakers paced the boarded floor as they shouted to the bleachers what sense they made of the move. Jim Mellen, a solemn, analytical "Weatherman," conceded that the SDS side had not acquitted itself impressively in the tactics of the split; for a while, some of the national leaders seemed to entertain fantasies of doing the whole business over again, only this time more cleanly and clearly.

It was true that neither side had acted with much nobility during the final stages of the confrontation. But if fault could be assigned in broader context, it seemed to lie with PL. Gresham's Law applies in paraphrase: bad politics drives good politics out. PL had made contributions to the Movement in its association with SDS (nobody loses all the time) but its overall effect had been deformative; it forced SDS into two years or more of reactive maneuvers, inevitably hypocritical and unproductive. So the discussion dragged on in both halls until midnight.

When the SDS side met again in the arena late Saturday morning, spirits were sailing. All night, meetings of regional groups and political blocs had given people the idea that the split was not only inevitable but somehow liberating. "We feel like we did inside one of the Columbia buildings," a girl told the crowd.

It was left to Bernardine Dohrn, one of SDS's three national secretaries, to sum up the meaning of the break and suggest a course of action. In what was obviously the outstanding political speech of the whole week, she explained the split with PL in the stream of Movement history, and claimed legitimacy for SDS as the keeper of a tradition that now was finding increasingly radical expression. The youth movement in America, she said, was spawned by black student sit-ins in the South and energized by the guerrillas of Vietnam and Cuba. It was not now going to deny its sources for the sake of PL's metaphysic. It was a thorough, tight—and devastating—job. "We are not a caucus," she said at the end. "We are SDS." And suddenly it all became true to the crowds in the bleachers, and they knew that there was no going back.

By evening, the strategy of "exclusion" was developed, and when the order was done and approved, the bleachers emptied and the SDS delegates filed

With its simple strategy of instant revolution by the working class and its logical and disciplined structure, PL appeals to young people who are tired of the tentative experimentalism and un-discipline of SDS organizing. More than that, the distracted and contradictory leadership of SDS's national office plays into the hands of PL's rationalized leader-base relationship: in a stormy season, a disciplined party is a comforting port for repair.

To see the divisions at last week's convention—and the eventual split between SDS and PL into rival organizations—as merely factional fights is to ignore their historical context and underlying meaning: the Movement fighting off a destructive force. To succeed, SDS had to reaffirm the traditions of native American radicalism of which it is the guardian, without losing the sense of worldwide revolution that had driven people into the streets in the first place. In mechanical terms, it had to throw off the PL incubus and accept the challenge to define its own self-conscious revolutionary ideology. Whether SDS can survive that struggle and remain a viable political organization is hard to predict now with any certainty. But what is more certain—and entirely exhilarating to the Movement "side"—is that SDS has at least taken the challenge seriously.

From the beginning, there was a *High Noon* quality to the convention week, a promise of a shoot-it-out on the Coliseum floor—if not with guns, then at least with low-caliber word-bullets and ideological grenades. Inside the ratty, batty old auditorium, it was not long before the first test of strength between PL and SDS developed. The issue was procedural, but it contained an attractive substantive twist: delegates had to vote speaking permission for Chris Milton, a young American who went to school in China and joined a platoon of the Red Guards in a "long march" through the countryside. PL was against the idea: Milton apparently espoused a "bad line" on American politics, although few of the non-PL delegates were able to tell just what was the trouble.

The most vociferous bloc in favor of Milton was the "Action Faction" of the Ohio-Michigan SDS region. At one heated point in the debate on Milton, the entire bloc—fifty people or more—jumped on their chairs, whipped out their Little Red Books, and began a joyful parody/performance of a Red Guard rally: "Ho, Ho, Ho, Chi Minh: NLF is Gonna Win!" and "Mao Tse-tung, Mao Tse-tung: Dare to Struggle, Dare to Win!" Those in the hall who could not yet identify the factions were puzzled and perhaps appalled, but the obvious hilarity on the chanters' faces placed them clearly outside the dead-serious PL style. It was the best kind of guerrilla theater, in which the action means something both for itself and for a lesson, and the spirit is both enlivening and instructive.

The Ohio-Michigan group was only one of a dozen or more major factions, tendencies and caucuses on the SDS regulars' side. To tell the players, or at least tell the plays, scorecards of a kind were provided in the appearance from time to time of proposals, resolutions, papers and uncategorizable ideological documents representing the various caucuses. The San Francisco Bay Area Revolutionary Union (called the RU) distributed its "Red Papers"; an SDS national office *groupuscule* (known as Klonsky-Coleman) passed out its "Revolutionary Youth Movement—II" proposal; and there were papers from anarchists, left-social-democrats, Harvard Marxist intellectuals, campus coalitions and local action projects.

But the most significant ideological force within SDS was a group of eleven New York and Midwestern activists and intellectuals who had drawn up an analytical and programmatic thesis called, simply, "You Don't Need a Weatherman to Know Which Way the Wind Blows" (the title is from Dylan—a characteristic weapon for that group to use against PL). "Weatherman" was a 16,000-word paper which made the first and crucial attempt of defining an ideology and a program for SDS as a movement of the most aggressive part of white radical youth. As a basic platform, it was the first major overhaul SDS has had since the "Port Huron Statement" and "America and the New Era," long ago (five years seems like a century) in the organization's post-liberal infancy and puberty.

The paper was both too short and too long, too rambling as an action guide and too sketchy for a coherent work of political philosophy. It was assertive in places where reasoned explanation was needed, and obtuse in other places where definition and delineation were required. A viscous rhetoric suffused the whole. But despite all those disabilities, Weatherman produced a valuable and honest set of notes for a native American revolutionary youth movement, in a setting of worldwide liberation struggles.

In simple summary (Weatherman itself is a barely reducible summary), the paper presented this argument: Opposition to US imperialism is the major international struggle today, and the "primary contradiction" of capitalism. Those who are leading the fight are the guerrillas of the Third World (principally, now, the Vietnamese and the Latin American *guevaristas*) and those of the "internal" black colony within the US. The empire will lose its grip as its resources are over-extended in dealing with the combined foreign and domestic rebellion. The US military and economic system cannot successfully maintain itself against intensive, expanded and protracted insurgency.

That central idea implies several consequences: first, the black liberation movement in the US is the most important element of the whole process. As

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If it was difficult to understand Weatherman without knowing its references in SDS's experience, it was just as hard to understand the many levels on which the convention seemed to be operating. Every procedural debate contained ideological implications and one-upmanship games that only a handful of the delegates could fathom. The "panel discussions" of the first three days degenerated into polemic-slinging contests between PL and SDS, at a rock-bottom level of debate. The one on women's liberation was a gross horror show; another on racism was little more than a screaming match.

But what went on off the platform—the things that are never reported in the straight press and rarely even in Movement papers—was the exact antithesis of the events onstage. Many of the caucuses and informal workshops on the SDS side and within WSA as well—where they were not dominated by PL cadres—worked in the close, undogmatic style that is the best tradition SDS keeps. And although very little about ideas and ideology could be learned from listening to the speakers at the podium, people did glean a great deal of understanding by bouncing ideas off one another.

The low point in the official proceedings was reached early Thursday night, when a clutch of Black Panthers arrived to speak. PL's sullen reception turned to noisy hostility when the first of the Panther speakers began baiting the delegates about women's liberation, and proceeded to promote "pussy power" as a revolutionary tactic. White delegates from the two sides all but shouted him down; a second Panther tried to retrieve the situation but drew even sharper catcalls from the audience. Finally, the third Panther combined part of an apology with an attack on white radicals' intellectual game-playing, and seemed to salvage some part of the disastrous performance. Typically, SDS people treated the affair as a healthy opening of criticism between allied movements; PL kept crying "male chauvinism"—in part, surely, as an opportune defense against the same charge SDS makes against PL ideology.

The Panthers' alliance with SDS, formalized by the white organization last winter in Austin, is a fragile affair at best. But it is the best attempt since the break-up of the "integrated" Southern student movement four years ago to align black and white radicals for joint action: this time on the basis of separate organizations with socialist ideas. Both the Panthers and SDS are anxious to preserve the relationship; the Panthers agreed to come to the convention to advance it, despite the predictable hostility from anti-white militant forces in the black community. PL, naturally, saw the Panthers' appearance as a bald power play by Mike Klonsky, the spearhead of SDS's alliance with both the Panthers and the Young Lords. And PL's perception was reinforced Friday night, when—in an atmosphere of growing rivalry between the two sides—the Panthers reappeared for the specific purpose of attacking the PL contempt for black self-determination.

PL people screamed at SDS for its "racist" use of the Panthers as a weapon of debate; SDS shouted back that that very argument revealed PL's

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silently back into the hall for the reading-out of Progressive Labor. Bernardine Dohrn presented the bill of particulars, which now seemed more like a bill of divorcement. The SDS delegates stood in aisles on the perimeters of the auditorium. The PL cadres sat scowling; the WSA kids sat uncomprehending. At the end of the order, PL people responded with a planned mass nervous giggle. Then, flanked by a dozen SDS delegates (chicks up front) who stood Panther-style on the podium, Bernardine Dohrn started to speak in explanation of the exclusion. But after initial attempts to quiet hecklers, the PL leaders began to cheerlead the hecklers themselves, and the speech sputtered to its conclusion: "Long live the victory of the people's war!" From Dylan to Lin Piao in forty-eight hours.

For the last day of the convention, PL met in the Coliseum to ponder the most perplexing strategic question in its history: What to do about its coveted "mass base," which had suddenly cut out? In a church across town, around the corner from its national office, SDS met in a much more upbeat mood. A tentative list of unity "principles" was drawn up for circulation and discussion at the local chapter level; national demonstrations against the war were set for Chicago in late September, to coincide with the beginning of the Chicago 8 conspiracy trial. Delegates took on the continuing problem of leader-base relations between the SDS national office and the local chapters. Finally, a slate of three national secretaries and an eight-man national interim committee was elected. All three secretaries—Mark Rudd, Jeff Jones and Bill Ayers—had been "Weathermen."

The significance of their election lies in that document. Although it never came up for convention action of any kind, it was an expression (chief among many) of the crucial theme of the week: the attempt to begin work on a New Left revolutionary socialist ideology and program. SDS's main problems have grown up in the failure to do that job. It has never really defined what it is—and how it differs from, say, Progressive Labor. And for that neglect, SDS alumni have strayed, because SDS could not identify itself as the critical center of the Movement.

The reasons SDS has failed so far in those respects are for the most part good ones. The original tensions within the Movement between personal liberation and political mobilization still play themselves out at every level. SDS contains both traits. What has to happen finally for SDS to survive is an integration of those traditions, probably in response to outside challenge and as a result of internal synthesis. Only then will the New Left become an American liberation movement.

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