

Report on the Harpur College Election Campaign by Peter Gellert
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Before we can analyze and discuss the victorious election campaign waged by the Binghamton YSA, one must understand a little about the campus. Harpur College is a medium-sized state school, with some 4,000 students. Most students are from a middle class family background, and attend school on a state scholarship. About 60 percent of the student body is from the New York City metropolitan area, most of them liberals and radicals. The remaining 40 percent are from up-state New York, and are generally more conservative. Generally the school is politically and socially liberal. About 85 percent oppose the war. The absence of any social regulations, coupled with a liberal, flexible administration produces a large degree of apathy on campus, and the absence of ROTC, war contracts or war research makes antiwar organizing somewhat difficult.

Organizationally, there was an SDS chapter which could draw upwards of one hundred students to a meeting. Its "leadership" was quite sympathetic to general Trotskyist positions, and when these people were recruited to the YSA, SDS fell apart. SDS had attempted to be both massive, involving significant sections of the campus and revolutionary, and this contradiction could not be solved. There is a YPSL chapter on campus, but it is relatively inactive, save for an occasional public statement condemning confrontation politics and appealing for moderation. There is also a chapter of the New Democratic Coalition, a McCarthy-O'Dwyer organization, but it too is relatively inactive. There are no members of the Communist Party or Progressive Labor on campus.

Campus struggles this year revolved around barring Marine recruiters from the administration building where students were allowed to visit them. SDS had called two demonstrations, the second a confrontation affair, and as a result, three students were suspended. Following this, YSA launched an amnesty campaign which involved many campus activists.

In early February the local decided to run a slate of candidates for United Student Government (USG) positions. We did this for several reasons. We wanted to expand the YSA's public activity and reach broad layers of students with our ideas; we wanted to win the support of campus radicals; we wanted to build YSA; and we wanted to make racism, the war, and the role of the university in society issues in the election campaign. We decided to run six candidates, on an openly socialist, YSA ticket.

Originally, we ran the campaign as strictly an educational project, but later, as the conditions changed and it became apparent that we were a major contender in the elections, it became necessary that to be taken seriously by students, we would have to run a serious campaign. At the same time, we were determined not to hide or compromise any political principles or fundamentally alter the character of our campaign. Our leaflets emphasized two points. One was racism, war, educational reform, etc. The other was the role of the student government, namely, its abstention from mass struggle, and its failure to effectively challenge the administration. Inasmuch as our opponents were liberals of varying degrees, we criticized them as such, and staunchly defended the concept of mass action. During the course of the campaign, we issued eight campaign leaflets in some 12,000 copies.

In addition, we were on three radio shows, one of which was a one-hour "rap" on Marxism and the YSA. We also received extensive front page coverage in the school and community press.

The reaction of other sections of the campus to our campaign was quite interesting. Virtually every campus radical supported our campaign, many quite actively and openly. The school newspaper, the Colonial News, said that inasmuch as a vote for the YSA candidates was a mandate against military recruitment, for amnesty for anti-recruitment demonstrators, and for militant action, they could not endorse any of our candidates, but they added that those students who agreed with our platform couldn't do better than to vote for our ticket. Our "left-liberal" opponent, Frank Maas, at first chose to ignore us, but later issued a statement saying that the place to deal with such off-campus issues as racism, war, etc. was off-campus, and that if we were really serious in our opposition to the war, we would refuse to pay our telephone tax! Our "moderate-liberal" opponent, Steve Owen, ran a particularly vicious campaign, complete with forged campaign signs, a blatant appeal for a Jewish ethnic vote ("the YSA favors the downfall of the Israeli state" from a candidate who wouldn't discuss Vietnam!) and a message to the student body urging them to "vote for sanity and against bloodshed and violence." These smear tactics cost him the election.

Actually, there were two elections. In the first election, the degree of political polarization on campus became clearly apparent to everyone. Gary Wurtzel of YSA polled 636 votes, Owen (moderate liberal) 634, and Maas (left liberal) 418. Owen was vigorously supported by right-wing elements on campus. More significantly, the "freak" candidate received only 39 votes, which shows the increasing degree of politicalization among hippie-type kids.

There was also a black write-in candidate who ran to better emphasize the issue of racism, which he didn't do. He made it clear that he didn't disagree with us politically, and he later endorsed our slate. He received 100 votes. Most important in our minds was the fact that the YSA received 450 straight socialist ticket votes, including for the candidate we ran against a non-socialist radical.

The second election was held due to the closeness of the YSA and Owen vote and the several election "irregularities" which occurred. Many left-liberal personalities on campus endorsed Wurtzel, and he won 1306 to Owen's 850. Another comrade, Andrea Baron, was elected to the post of secretary. The voter turnout in this election broke all school records; some 86 percent turned out to elect the first socialist student body president. There were 600 YSA ticket votes in this election.

While the vote obviously is not a mandate for the dictatorship of the proletariat or for socialism, it was a mandate for radical action and change. Next term we plan referendums on political issues such as recruitment, the black struggle, and campus reforms, and intend to use our elected positions to advance the struggle, as well as build the YSA.

When looking back to our original goals when we decided to run a slate of candidates, it becomes even more apparent that our campaign

was a success in other ways than our ability to get votes. We are known by everyone on campus and the radicals look to YSA for political leadership. We succeeded in making the USG campaign one of issues and not personalities, and forced the other candidates to speak on the issues we wanted discussed. Unfortunately, we did not concentrate on building the YSA and circulating our press as much as we could have, but we plan to change this next semester.

The Binghamton local feels that it has an important job ahead next term - we were elected by the student body and must provide militant and effective leadership on all levels of the struggle, both within the student government and in the general mass movement. Our ability to do this task will be determined by the growth of the YSA next semester and our continued intense political work on campus.