

SDS on the Split at the Convention

The following are reprinted from the 30 June 1969 issue of New Left Notes. They include a resolution passed at the convention following the walkout by RYM and an article by newly elected National Secretary John Pennington.

Statement on the Walk-Out

Last night a minority group faction of the Students for a Democratic Society National Convention split off from the original. This faction included a majority of the previous leadership whose anti-working class politics and practices have been exposed and defeated. They have lost the confidence of the majority of the original -- both on the campuses and at the convention. Recognizing this, they walked out of the convention hall, held their own meeting, and declared that the Progressive Labor Party (PLP) was purged from SDS. This fallacious attempt to cover up their political defeat was coupled with the false claim that they legitimately represented SDS.

However, there is only ONE S.D.S.: This meeting in the Coliseum is the 1969 National Convention of SDS. This attempt to split and destroy the student movement must and will be fought.

We of this convention repudiate the disgraceful anti-communist and anti-working class attacks of this splinter group's leadership on the Progressive Labor Party, the Worker-Student Alliance caucus, and in fact on all members of SDS, regardless of their positions on various other questions.

In splitting, this minority faction of the convention shamelessly distorted and lied about the positions of other SDSers. To clarify and correct these distortions, we reaffirm our complete support of the right of all oppressed nations to self-determination and give active support to such struggles as that of the Vietnamese people. By self-determination we mean the political and economic independence of all oppressed people. We demand the immediate, unconditional withdrawal of US imperialism from Viet Nam and everywhere else in the world. Furthermore, we reaffirm our support for the Black Liberation Move-

ment in this country and we oppose the vicious attacks by the ruling class on this movement, most clearly demonstrated by the severe repression of the Black Panther Party.

The attempt of the old National Office leadership to say that the various interpretations of specific strategies within SDS are in contradiction to these basic principles is a complete distortion of the truth.

We shall not let this struggle end in Chicago. Over the summer and next fall we shall take the SDS struggle back to the campuses. We shall rely upon the people to further repudiate the splinter leadership and reaffirm that there shall not be two SDSs. We know that many people who were part of the group which left the convention do not support them politically and have serious doubts about the action. We appeal to these people to return to SDS and fight for their politics within the organization. The leadership's attempt to split SDS is a service only to imperialism and it will be defeated!

The class struggle is sharpening internationally. In this country the black liberation struggle is taking the lead. The growing student movement is beginning to lead mass struggles to fight against imperialism, racism, and male chauvinism, and to build an alliance with the working class -- the key force in defeating US imperialism. The past SDS national leadership failed to give any direction to that struggle. This convention shall not fail. We have worked out a program today to continue to build this fight!

DARE TO STRUGGLE

DARE TO WIN

SDS 1969 CONVENTION

NATIONAL SECRETARY'S REPORT

RYM Walks Out

by John Pennington

On Saturday night, June 21, outgoing National Secretary Mike Klonsky and Inter-Organizational Secretary Bernadine Dohrn led a walkout of about one-third of the 1969 National Convention. After the walkout, their Revolutionary Youth Movement (RYM) faction set up a separate meeting, with tight security procedures, claiming to have expelled members of the Progressive Labor Party and other SDSers with whom they disagreed. Meanwhile, the Convention continued in the Chicago Coliseum, debating and passing resolutions, electing national officers, raising funds. The following editorial, written in close consultation with all members of the National Interim Committee (NIC), is an evaluation of this situation, which has shaken SDS.

Unprincipled split

Splits are not good or bad of themselves. But the RYM walkout at the Convention was unprincipled because it was not rooted in a good political basis. A lot of the appeal was, rather, to anti-communism -- to the notion, around which the RYM leaders have organized, that PL is a bunch of robot-masters, an outside force which directs opposition to the RYM with deadly efficiency. 'All that appeared necessary for WSA membership,' argues the Guardian's Randy Furst, 'was to raise one's hand at the correct moment in support of the PL position on a vote.' (6/28/69) The dangerous PL external cadre are behind all opposition to the RYM, argues the 'national collective', and they have no place in SDS. Distorting their opponents' views and appealing to this anti-communism to smash opposition, the RYM leaders have themselves united on an opportunistic basis. Politically, RYM leaders are at each other's throats. But Dohrn and Klonsky led the split (Education Secretary Fred Gordon stayed) because the fact that their 'national collective' has provided no good leadership was becoming increasingly exposed. That is, they figured they might lose. This, and not anti-imperialist politics, made possible these leaders' unity.

Their opportunism manifested itself most grossly in racism -- their attempt to hide behind the Black Liberation movement, thus intimidating opposition.

Such an unprincipled split can hardly build the movement. It can only damage chapters, can only hurt our ability to fight Imperialism. It must be taken seriously. Many who walked out with Dohrn and Klonsky have seen that the split was unprincipled. We hope these people will return to the organization.

Opportunist history

Throughout this year, RYM leaders have concentrated on two things: infighting for political control, and uniting to 'get PL', i.e., to smash the growing worker-student alliance caucus. Instead of anti-imperialist leadership, that learns from people and criticizes its mistakes, we've seen a series of revolutionary poses shifted time and again to fit selfish needs --

the particular leader's place in the sun, and the campaign against 'PL'.

Thus, at the Princeton Conference this winter, worker-student alliance advocates were attacked by the 'national collective' as being insufficiently anti-imperialist for presenting the fight against racism, focused against the especially fierce exploitation of Black workers, as key. But within two weeks, the RYM leaders had dropped the anti-militarism packet they'd pushed through the conference, without even explaining why. New Left Notes not only did nothing to aid struggles against racism, it also offered no help to the growing fights against ROTC. While liberal student power politics were cloaked in revolutionary-looking clothes ('universities must serve the people') positions were adopted and then dropped with bewildering rapidity.

RYM leaders at Columbia backed a Black student group's demand for \$100,000 for a student power board to help plan an ethnic studies program. Then the Columbia leaders pushed through a motion banning further chapter action against Columbia's expansion (which is destroying Black and white working people's homes) and ROTC, until the student power committee was granted! When people speak of the RYM leaders as anti-working class, the charge is hardly without real basis! They refused to fight against the vicious attacks Columbia was making against working people, unless some student power was obtained! Then, when Black student leaders joined deans in condemning SDS, the whole program was dropped, though previously it had been the PRECONDITION for other struggles.

And NLN! At best useless, in many ways NLN was harmful -- filled with revolutionary posturing, but little analysis of good and bad aspects of struggles; pages of support statements to build the 'national collective's' power, but no programs useful for building campus struggles -- and, through it all, WSA ideas simply banned. Many wouldn't join National SDS because of NLN.

Most people came to the convention fed up with the 'national collective's' misleadership. Realizing that they had been exposed in practice, the RYM leaders tried preventing full discussion. Thus, as the Convention opened, RYM leaders first opposed workshops on the ground that there was no room. When that was exposed as a hoax - there was plenty of room - they tried a more 'political' attempt to torpedo discussion. Klonsky argued (incredibly) that workshops were 'PL's hunting ground for naive young people!' Another RYM leader maintained that supporting workshops was anti-communist, for it showed people didn't trust a few leaders to fight it out on the floor!

The membership voted them down, so the 'national collective' proposed speakers and panels to replace various slots of workshop time. This tactic was

cleverer. They got away with it.

Baits and distortions

What people wanted was a discussion of how different approaches relate to the actual practice of building an anti-Imperialist, anti-racist movement. Demonstrating real contempt for people - both in how they argued and what they said - RYM leaders avoided discussion of practice, always trying to divert debate into baiting PL and the large worker-student alliance caucus, of which PL is a part, smearing worker-student alliance people as being racist, reactionary, opposed to all struggles, etc. The aim was to isolate PL from the WSA caucus and the caucus from most delegates, to brand any opponent a PL simp, and everyone knew what THEY were like. Counting on many people's unfamiliarity with WSA stands, the RYM leaders never showed how the WSA people's supposedly wrong ideas affected their practical work, in the campus fights from S.F. State to Harvard, in which they have played a key role. And when their own practice was criticized - as at Columbia and Berkeley - RYM leaders had no response.

Despite RYM leaders' attempts to glide down an anti-PL, anti-WSA ski trail, it was clear they were losing the debate. Jim Mellon, RYM leader from Michigan, is quoted in the Guardian as saying, 'PL outorganized us and made us look politically ridiculous.' While the RYM leaders' unprincipled politics were definitely exposed, the way Mellon puts it is typical of how RYM leaders try to distort the situation. It was not just PL or for that matter the WSA caucus which 'made RYM look politically ridiculous'. Many people who disagree with WSA ideas (as stated, for instance, in the Student Labor Action Project Proposal, and the Less Talk, More Action - Fight Racism proposal passed at the Convention) opposed the 'national collective's' 'politically ridiculous' leadership. The 'national collective' was hardly defeated politically ONLY by PL, i.e. 'outorganized' by the proverbial 'handful of skilled and highly organized reds' who've been plaguing the world this past century. Putting it that way is an attempt to scare people away from SDS, to say 'now it's just PL's thing'. The fact is that many people not in the WSA caucus opposed the 'national collective's' misleadership, and in doing so all were speaking to the experience of much of the membership.

A good example of the 'national collective's' total bankruptcy was their handling of the racism panel. Mike Klonsky, one of the participants, offered no program, instead repeating over and over again that 'PL doesn't believe in self-determination'. Jared Israel of PL cited the LESS TALK - MORE ACTION - FIGHT RACISM program as the way to fight racism and back Black people's struggles, as opposed to Klonsky's verbal support for secession-in-the-abstract. The message was clear. For the RYM leaders self-determination was lip service.

Similarly, the Bay Area Revolutionary Union (RU) faction of the RYM could not defend their practice. RU's notion that 'communism appears in disguise' and that 'every great rebellion is the conclusion of every partial rebellion' were attacked as opportunistic. It was argued that revolution doesn't spread of its own like a field of mushrooms, that great rebellions have always required the defeat of bad leadership that builds itself based on bourgeois ideas among the masses of people -- precisely what RU does not oppose.

Many saw that in practice the 'national collective' functions either to the detriment of working people (e.g. at Columbia, blocking the anti-expansion fight) or simply provides no leadership. They indulge in unprincipled - really careerist - organizational battles, trying to cover rotten practice by revolutionary posturing.

So things were getting clearer by the second day, Thursday. The RYM leaders began to quarrel more among themselves: the 'national collective' was getting wobbly, and very nervous.

Friday evening, resolutions on racism were to be presented. What an embarrassment! Having called everyone racist, the RYM leaders had no program or proposals on the question.

The RYM leaders seized on an opportunity to bring matters to a head and hold onto some position. Although three members of the Black Panther Party (BPP) had already addressed the convention Thursday, Friday evening a group of Panther officials returned with an urgent message. The message, which was delivered for nearly an hour, was an attack on PL, including threats.

After the attack, Jeff Gordon from PL responded. First he stated that PL would not be intimidated. Second he discussed certain political questions the Panthers had raised. Supporting the BPP stand on armed self-defense, he argued that contradicted recent talk about community control of police. Gordon asserted PL support for self-determination. PL differed with many, he explained, in that while backing anti-imperialist struggles for self-determination, it was their estimate that such fights could only win by achieving socialism, the rule of the working class. He also explained PL's stand on nationalism -- which was highly critical, but hardly, as RYM leaders maintain, that 'Black nationalism equals racism in reverse'. Third Gordon stated that his main point was the RYM leaders had functioned with gross opportunism. Their politics, he said, were defeated. Unable to defend them, they distorted the struggles of Black people and then used them just the way white liberals had used SNCC -- as a cover.

After Gordon finished, someone suggested the debate return to how to fight against racism. This was discussed. Then Bernadine Dohrn took the podium. Opposing discussing racism, not answering a word Gordon had said, she declared that: 'It's clear that we can't work in the same group as an organization that hates the Black Panthers and opposes self-determination.' Amidst a deafening chant, 'NO SPLIT, NO SPLIT' from most of the room, Bernadine led less than one-third into an adjoining room.

Arguing that the split was not planned in advance, the Guardian cites 'tactical blunders, utter confusion, manipulation and unpreparedness attendant upon the decision.' Whether or not the split was planned in advance isn't the issue. The Guardian is correct, the split was highly 'manipulative'. Instead of arguing for their politics, the crumbling RYM leadership hid behind the Panthers, jumping in with the walkout call. They had first used this approach at the Austin National Council. 'We speak for the BPP,' runs the argument, 'support us or you're a motherfucking racist.'

With the RYM factions meeting in closed session all Saturday the Convention continued, finally holding good

workshops. LESS TALK - MORE ACTION was finally DISCUSSED, as were the war and women's liberation -- and, of course, the walkout. In the adjoining room, with all opposition excluded or intimidated, the RYM leaders whipped up support for expelling PL 'and their supporters'. Finally the RYM returned. With Bernadine Dohrn at the podium, RYM supporters surrounded the room, standing in the aisles. (Apparently some had been warned not to sit beside the delegates, who, they'd been told, would attack them.) Dohrn launched into a long, by now familiar, but even wilder attack on PL -- which by this point opposed all struggles of oppressed people -- worldwide! People were intimidated at first. But when Dohrn declared that 'PL and all those who agree with their counter-revolutionary positions (!) are expelled from SDS!' people broke into laughter. No discussion. No vote. No nothing. Just: Out Demon, out! A small faction had returned to the Convention and declared -- who?: who knows, perhaps the majority? -- expelled. Despite the rottenness of what Dohrn was doing, despite everything, people laughed. After that, the intimidation effect vanished. People reacted especially angrily when the speaker said, 'Now I'd like to say a few words to the worker student alliance people in the room.' Poor dupes! As if the RYM leaders expected members of that caucus - a large part though by no means all of those who'd remained - to react favorably after listening to half an hour of lies.

About one-third of the room walked out. The next day, with the convention continuing in the Coliseum, the RYM faction met in a church. The two meetings were very different. SDS discussed and passed resolutions around fighting racism and male chauvinism, as well as a constitutional amendment and a statement on the walkout. The RYM passed NO on-campus programs at all. And the atmosphere in the two rooms also differed considerably. In the SDS convention, people spoke, and came in and out with minimum difficulty. But in the church, RYM security was highly intimidating. People with 'the right' politics could heckle. Those with 'the wrong' ideas were silenced by defense guards. Door security bordered on paranoia. Instead of debating campus programs, the 'national collective' conducted a not-so-disguised battle for political position, a positional war of careerists. Many who'd gone to the church out of curiosity or from fear of PL began wondering whether, indeed, they could work in the RYM. (Apparently, the Dohrn/Mellon faction won this in-fight. At least two of the three secretaries and most NIC members elected by the RYM are part of the Dohrn/Mellon weatherman-proposal 'group' -- whose politics are about as certain as the weather.)

Fight racism

The main resolution the convention passed was LESS TALK - MORE ACTION - FIGHT RACISM! The RYM leaders were handy with verbal support - they could out-talk anyone. But this proposal is a plan for actions to fight the racist university. Seeing the key link between building a pro-working class student movement and fighting racism, it calls for a militant three-pronged campaign next fall:

- * AGAINST pig institutes and racist courses.
- * AGAINST racist university expansion.
- * FOR preferential hiring of Black and Latin workers on campus, unionization of campus workers, improvement in pay and working conditions.

This anti-racist program should be tied into anti-imperialist struggles demanding the immediate withdrawal of US troops from Vietnam and around the world. Concrete demands should include the immediate and total end to ROTC, banning of all military recruiters and ending weapons and counter-insurgency research. The proposal calls for actions in mid-November to give nationwide thrust to this anti-racist, anti-imperialist program.

This, far more than RYM verbalism, will hurt the bourgeoisie and build ties with working people on a good basis. As opposed to student power demands for 'sharing' control of racist universities, these concrete struggles can really hurt the rulers.

But we shouldn't wait for the fall to launch this fight. Racist law-and-order propaganda is being pumped out continually. Militant Black groups, like the Panthers, are under fierce attack. Conditions of all working people - especially Blacks - are rotting. Militant actions against ruling class attacks on Black people are key. Especially important is support for Black rebellions. This will be discussed in NLN -- but people shouldn't wait for that. Plans can be made locally -- to reach white working people, as well as for demonstrations against the National Guard and possibly attempts to block their use. The work-in is also important for fighting racism. Learning from working people really makes possible effectively attacking racism among white workers, building ties with militants - especially Blacks - which can make possible upping the ante on worker-student alliances in the fall.

What now for SDS?

We are very much alive. Last year we attacked the bourgeoisie on many campuses. This year we must build far more militant struggles, turning campuses into political battlegrounds against the rulers.

The RYM walkout is unprincipled and will divide many chapters. But the question can't be avoided. We must fight hard to hold SDS together. If this is done, the split can be defeated.

The RYM seized the office with all the records and the press. The N.O. has been moved, temporarily, to Boston; it will remain there over the summer. National Officers have been elected -- mostly people with a lot of basic organizing experience. They will be contacting local people during the summer, soliciting articles for NLN, discussing summer and fall program, trying to be what the old N.O. never was -- responsive to the membership.

The National Interim Committee (NIC) met Monday after the convention. We discussed fighting racism, holding the organization together and building it stronger. The RYM leaders, with their very sectarian outlook, are planning who next to expel. We all agreed, and this is very important: as opposed to the RYM, SDS is NOT closed off. This is no phony liberalism on our part. Although politically diverse, the NIC is thoroughly opposed to the leadership of the old N.O. -- but we are expelling no one. The debate on how best to build SDS into an anti-imperialist force capable of developing a pro-working class student movement must go on within the organization.

We are convinced that most of the minority who walked out will realize this and return.

