

# PL-SDS and the politics of disruption

By TONY THOMAS

Does the antiwar movement have the right to hold meetings, demonstrations and rallies without being disrupted? Was the physical ejection of members of Progressive Labor Party (PLP) and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) who disrupted the July 2-4 National Peace Action Coalition convention justified? Why did the disruption take place?

All of these questions were posed at the July 2-4 NPAC national conference in New York City. Individual PLP and SDS members were removed from the opening rally for disruption and banned from the conference for their stated intention of continuing this disruption. Similar actions of disruption and violence by PLP members over the past few years were convincing evidence that they would in fact continue to try to disrupt the gathering.

PLP and the small remnants of SDS opposed the inclusion of Senator Vance Hartke and Victor Reuther, an official of the United Auto Workers, as speakers in the July 2 rally that opened the NPAC convention. They claimed that such speakers have "sell-out" positions on many issues and thus should be excluded from participation in the rally.

If this policy were actually carried out, the antiwar movement would be reduced to supporting one or another of the different political tendencies, since overall political program would be the basis for admission to the antiwar movement rather than support to mass actions to end the war.

But the real issue was not who was on the speakers list, a decision which was democratically approved by the opening session of the conference. The real issue was whether a small minority has the right to enforce their views on the majority through physical disruption, as the PLP and SDS members tried to do. After the overwhelming majority of the conference approved the agenda, PLP members hooted, hollered, used sound equipment, and charged the speakers' platform in an effort to drown out or prevent from speaking those speakers they disliked. When marshals and ushers asked them to stop, and tried to eject several disrupters, PLP and SDS supporters attacked them. This led to the removal of about 100 disrupters, which was fully approved by the conference of over 2,000 people (see July 16 *Militant*).

The logic of PLP's assertion is that it alone has the right to determine who are "sell-outs" and that it has the right to take upon itself the responsibility for silencing them. It could thus label any position that it disagrees with as a "sell-out," including those of organizations and individuals in the radical movement, and use that as a justification for disrupting their meetings and attacking them.

NPAC had no choice but to eject the PLP and SDS disrupters. Any other course would have denied the right of

the antiwar movement to hold meetings, rallies and demonstrations without disruption.

One of the strengths of the antiwar, Black liberation, Chicano and women's liberation movements is the practice of democratic decision making at their meetings and conferences. Ideas are presented from all points of view, there is discussion, and decisions are made on the basis of majority votes. Every organization has the right to organize itself without attacks and disruptions from those who oppose it.

## Disruption vs. debate

If these procedures and the right of NPAC or any other group to hold meetings without disruption were rejected, it would be a serious blow to all the mass movements.

For instance: since the majority of the people at the NPAC conference were against PLP's politics, would it not have been correct, following the logic put forward by the disrupters, for this majority to have interrupted and physically threatened and attacked the PLP and SDS members who spoke throughout the conference? Would it not have been justified for persons from NPAC to go to PLP meetings and rallies and demand that no PLP members speak and hoot down disagreeable speakers or physically threaten or attack them?

If such a policy were accepted within the movement, brute force would replace political discussion. Anyone not willing to undergo physical combat to participate in a radical meeting would be discouraged from taking part in the antiwar movement. Energy now spent on organizing mass actions against the Indochina war would be diverted into internecine combat within the movement and lead to tragic injuries and even deaths.

Organizations with large memberships, powerful resources and/or the favor of the police would be best able to function in such a situation. Attempts by police provocateurs to disrupt the antiwar movement would be enhanced by this atmosphere.

Furthermore, physical attacks and

clashes between various tendencies in the antiwar movement would be an open invitation for the police to come in and "settle" the disputes in their own way. This would lead to serious victimization of all those involved and help pave the way for increased government attacks on the antiwar movement.

## Stalinist methods

PLP's support of physical attacks and disruption within the movement flows from its admitted and open adherence to the methods of Stalin. The U. S. Communist Party during its ultra-left "third period" in the late 1920s and early 1930s—the period of the CP's history that PLP models itself on—organized physical attacks on members of the Socialist Party (whom they called "social fascists"), Trotskyists and other groups that opposed their politics.

This was an attempt to transplant the brutal methods of the Stalinist bureaucrats in the Soviet Union to the U. S. radical and labor movements. Just as Stalin attempted to silence criticism by revolutionary socialists within the Russian workers movement, the American CP tried to substitute goon-squad tactics for political debate.

The CPUSA was forced to curtail these tactics only after it had created a scandalous image for itself, and also because other groups began to organize an effective defense against these tactics.

PLP has sought to revive these methods. In 1967, PLP members attacked *Militant* salespeople and SWP election campaigners outside of a PLP rally in San Francisco. In New York, in that same year, PLP members physically set upon supporters of the New York Vietnam Peace Parade Committee who were trying to get signatures to put an antiwar referendum on the ballot.

Since the splintering of SDS and PLP's growing isolation from the radical movement, PLP has, in desperation, resorted increasingly to the use of physical disruption to combat ideas

and organizations that it opposes.

When antiwar organizations around the country rejected PLP and SDS proposals that capitalist politicians and reformist labor leaders be excluded from the April 15, 1970, demonstrations, PLP organized its followers to attempt to "trash" the demonstrations. The April 15 antiwar rally held by the New York Vietnam Moratorium Committee was broken up by SDS and PLP-inspired disrupters shortly after it began.

Similarly, following the May 1970 student upsurge, in which PLP opposed turning the universities and high schools into organizing centers for the antiwar movement, PLP launched a series of physical attacks on Young Socialist Alliance and Student Mobilization Committee activists.

The center of these attacks was the Boston area—once a PLP stronghold—which had become one of the main centers of the antiwar movement. On May 3, 1970, Bob Bresnahan, an SMC and YSA activist who was a marshal captain in defense of the Boston April 15 demonstration, was attacked at a YSA educational conference by eight SDS members who beat him after knocking him down.

On May 24, a national steering committee meeting of the SMC held in Boston was attacked by over 50 PLP and SDS members led by SDS National Secretary John Pennington. John McCann, an SWP member who was coordinator of the fight that led to the successful Massachusetts 1970 antiwar referendum, was savagely beaten at this meeting.

PLP's proposals were rejected by increasing majorities at the NPAC conferences in June and December 1970.

Having given up the idea of winning support for their ideas through open discussion, they cynically decided to break up the July 1971 antiwar conference by disruption. This attempt was thwarted because the overwhelming majority of participants in the NPAC convention believed in the right of NPAC and everyone else in the movement to hold their meetings.



PL-SDS hooligans disrupting recent NPAC antiwar convention

Photo by Ed Weaver

## NPAC statement on La Raza

Carmen Pola of the Oakland chapter of the Raza Unida Party read the following statement, along with the National Antiwar Convention Raza workshop proposal, at a West Coast National Peace Action Coalition news conference July 13 in San Francisco.

The people of La Raza have been against every war this government has initiated since the beginning of its bloody history. The war in Indochina is no exception.

We have been some of the biggest victims of these foreign adventures. In 1917, for example, Puerto Ricans were gratuitously granted U. S. citizenship so that we could be used as cannon fodder in World War I. Today, Raza casualties for the five-state

area known as the U. S. Southwest (California, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and Texas) account for about 20 percent of the total number of U. S. casualties in Indochina for this area, although we comprise only about 11 percent of the population in these five states. So it becomes very clear which people in American society fight the wars started and fostered by its civilian rulers and their bloodthirsty generals.

We of La Raza have demonstrated our opposition time and again in the past four years to this war in dozens of antiwar marches throughout the Southwest and in other places as well. Over 30,000 Raza marched in Los Angeles last Aug. 29 to protest this

war. That march we won't easily forget. Three of our people died at the hands of the brutal Los Angeles and Los Angeles County pigs, and scores were injured. I should add, however, that the pigs got a good fight for their money, for our people defended themselves bravely until hundreds of pig invaders overwhelmed our barrio and began beating men, women and children indiscriminately, in their usual style.

It almost goes without saying that we support any actions against the war in Indochina which we think will bring our brothers back here where they should be, fighting the social and economic injustices inflicted by this government on a large portion of its society.