

O P E N L E T T E R T O S D S  
from the Spartacist League

During the past few months a great number of events of a substantial nature have occurred, events which in their cumulative effect may have a certain world-historical impact. It is the contention of this paper that these events must raise serious questions vital to SDS and indeed the whole of the "New Left", so called; these are questions of method and analysis, of point of view and tactics. It is vital that these questions be raised at this time, for they challenge values and assumptions implied in or accepted by SDS and its periphery for the entire life-span of the organization.

Since the beginning of 1968 we have seen a tremendous drive toward military victory by the National Liberation Front in Vietnam; the decision of President Johnson not to run again for office; the sucker-bait "peace" campaign by Senator McCarthy, which seems to have gathered him millions of adherents; the assassinations of Dr. King and Senator Kennedy; the political upheavals in the East European Soviet bloc countries; continuing opposition to the passage of the West German Emergency Laws; and the magnificent revolt on the part of the French workers and students, a revolt which brought the entire country nearly to the brink of social revolution. These incidents did not occur in isolation from each other; rather, every single one of them was the result of some various form of social struggle, and these results in turn became the causes which will produce other, social effects. The effects are intertwined, and their results have a cumulative effect.

Frustration Without Direction

All these events must be seen against the backdrop of the American scene today. It is a complex and shifting scene, but one whose major features can clearly be discerned despite all the motion. There is a rage and frustration about the war in Vietnam which envelopes literally millions of Americans who no longer accept the pious justifications and rationalizations about U.S. intentions, who will no longer tolerate the casualties and the costs; people with no recourse to change within the prevailing channels. There is a bitter rejection of the whole social order within the ghetto. The drying-up of the civil rights movement and the unheard petitioning from the Black community have led as a consequence to an inward-turning against social struggle and a parallel sharpening of hostility along race lines, which takes the form of Black Nationalism. But this nationalism, precisely because it rejects allies across race lines and has no real social changes in mind, is programmatically incapable of transforming society to change the conditions which lead to the superexploitation of Black people.

There is, cutting across these two issues and largely obscured by them, a rising tide of struggle on the rank-and-file level within the trade union movement, a fight which expresses itself in fights both against the union bureaucracies and in spontaneous walkouts from jobs and wildcatting strikes. Even the sanctity of the Holy of Holies within the top bureaucratic leadership is challenged, with the status of the United Auto Workers within the AFL-CIO unclear at the time of writing, but with a definite attitude of mutiny about the union. But again there is no viable form of expression for working-class politics, and consequently nowhere for the energy for struggle to be directed. Neither the Wallace campaign on the right nor Peace and Freedom and the Socialist Workers Party between them on the left can offer a realistic challenge to the major bourgeois parties. There is nowhere for the working class to go. But the bitterness and frustration are growing.

This then is a delineation of the central forces facing would-be revolutionaries like SDS today, and any program for a fundamental social change must come seriously to grips with them. The question that arises, then, is how competent SDS and its periphery are to handle such difficult problems. It should be said, in passing, that to date SDS has not shown itself a very valuable instrument for securing social change--and that is putting it rather mildly.

Pragmatism vs. Marxism

For example, SDS since its birth has never had much of a general social theory to give direction to its actions. Most of its "theory"

has been a hodge-podge of bits of C. Wright Mills, Staughton Lynd, an ultra-democratic rhetoric and some of the verbiage--not ideas, words--of Marx. In this SDS is square in the mainstream of American radicalism, even in the mainstream of the so-called "Old Left" whose tenets the majority of SDS accept while affecting to despise them. (Except that then the quotations were from Lenin and Stalin, bought uncritically and equally never digested.) Like the "Old Left" the SDS starts from "the facts", not theory. And from this crude, blind pragmatism, this empiricism has been built, from the flaw in the base, the failure to date of American mass movements of social change. This has been true of revolutionary vanguard parties, too--because all historical evidence to date shows that without theory, without correct method, it is impossible either to formulate a revolutionary socialist program or to build the party, the instrument to educate and coordinate the struggle for that program. Without an understanding of the basic laws of history as outlined by Marx, revolutionary movements become merely the captives of the whims and impressions of their leadership; such movements, devoid of any historical perspective, become incapable of projecting a struggle over rough terrain, involving great forces, which may last for decades.

Yet most attempts to get SDS to deal with "theory" have had about as much likelihood of success as have appendectomies performed with beer-can openers. This does not reflect so much upon the SDS rank-and-file as its leadership--SDS is quite consciously and theoretically "anti-theoretical". There is a reason for this. Like its false conception of trying to build cadre along anti-disciplinary lines--"participatory democracy", a proven failure--this is a bastardized form of idealism, a particularly unfortunate phenomenon, one with long historical roots in the American reform tradition. Idealism in the main involved the myth that small groups of radical intellectuals, armed only with a given idea, could impose that idea on society as a whole and so "improve" it. What happened of course was tragic but predictable--the men and their ideas were co-opted by the ruling class, who turned the idea to their own benefit and profit, and employed their originators as administrators of the ideas!

#### Compartmentalized Anti-Politics

xThis ties in neatly with a discernible strain of SDS thinking which can only be termed anti-political. This has two extreme positions, and the membership's thinking seems to flow from one to the other rather like a pendulum, from campus to campus, year to year. The first is related to the above point about idealism: by refusing to deal with an overall theory, by focusing on individual issues (like the peace movement) or organizing projects, and without the theoretical grounding to indicate that such radical changes can only be brought about by the total transformation of the society, i.e., social revolution, the door is left wide open for any radical-talking huckster. Thus, whole SDS chapters on a number of Midwest campuses (St. Louis, Chicago) have openly been co-opted and integrated into the McCarthy campaign. Other campus chapters are no doubt horrified by this, but it is doubtful if they see the connection with their own approach.

The other extreme pole of this pendulum is more colorful and annoying to conservatives, but is equally pernicious within the revolutionary movement as is the opportunism of tail-ending McCarthy--this is "mindless activism". This is spectacular but rarely gets anywhere, and it seems to operate largely as a catharsis. Or maybe a romantic martyrdom. There have been no revolutions known to history won by students beating cops over the club with their heads, and such methods only serve to direct would-be revolutionary energy at the servants of the ruling class, while not bothering with the class enemy itself.

Political activity, where indulged in by small sectors of the population, should be mainly exemplary and educative. It may of course be necessary at times to defend oneself against cops and get caught in a bit of violence, and it is not the point of this paper to criticize such tactics altogether for there may well be times when such methods will become useful and necessary; we are not pacifists or believers in non-violence. What we are opposed to is the tendency which equates violence, cop-fighting and "confrontation" with militancy, and views any tactic not so geared as a cop-out.

The entire tactic of "draft resistance", for example, which serves only to seal off the inchoate anti-war feeling among young workers in the Army from any contact with the most militant anti-war New Leftists, stems in part from the New Left's conviction that the most militant action is by definition the action which incurs the severest penalties--i.e., permanent expatriation or jail.

An example of militant revolutionary politics as it applies to an educative purpose--and the improper use of "confrontation politics"--is easily available. Some time ago, the New York local of the Spartacist League called for picketing a large rally by SANE, denouncing them as "Johnson's loyal opposition" and as enemies of the Vietnamese revolution. Spartacist called for a Viet Cong military victory as the proper solution to the Vietnamese war. Yet this demonstration was not supported by any of the groups who like to parade about under "anti-imperialist" banners and get their heads broken. The point here is that political action, political concepts, and a concern for the support and understanding of broad sections of the general population--the educative principle--should not automatically be regarded as reformist, as non-revolutionary.

### Passivity and Pessimism

There is, finally, one more negative characteristic of SDS as a whole which ought to be discussed--this is the question of pessimism. Most SDS'ers don't think a majority revolution in the United States is possible--that is, a revolutionary struggle directly involving the majority of the American public. They see contemporary industrial society largely as frozen--certainly they do not see the working class as a class capable of motion, i.e., as an agency of revolutionary social change.

This is reflected in their reading and their talk. Everywhere in the SDS milieu, the people one hears discussed are those who seem to have reached the status of New Left "heroes"--Castro, Guevara, Debray, Fanon, Mao--and, perhaps for the intellectuals, Marcuse and Isaac Deutscher. Yet is it not curious that, Deutscher alone excepted, one common strain runs through their writing: that each, for his own purposes and in his own way, denies the revolutionary potentiality and ability of the modern industrial working class? That is, something along the shop-worn line that the workers are passive, bought off, corrupted--it all boils down to non-revolutionary. Of all the above-named individuals, in fact, only Deutscher held formally to the traditional Marxist-Leninist view of the revolutionary potential of the workers, and even he was so trapped by impressionism as to be unable to suggest a proper agency to orient and galvanize this still-embryonic revolutionary lever.

This influence has a couple of extremely negative implications: first of all, it reinforces a lot of petty-bourgeois conditioning on the part of would-be radicals, for it tells them what they have always felt: that the working class is no damned good, that it is neither capable nor worthy of making a revolution. Secondly, it imparts a further sense of impotence and passivity in its audience by showing them where the "real" revolutions are, and one only has to sit back and enthuse. Because if one is radical in an industrial country where no class has revolutionary capabilities, there's no sense in doing anything there. And now, especially, this is quite a danger, because now there has been a great change on the world scene.

### What Role for SDS?

To the questions: what is to be done, then? what should SDS's role and function be now? we can now say--the answer is clear and simple. (It always has been, but for some people historical lessons are not easily learned.) Fortunately, we now no longer have to talk of theoretical analyses, of long-gone historical events--we now have a clear, relevant and basic model--we have France in May-June 1968.

Only last month one of the most vibrant political lessons in revolutionary method was again offered the international working class by the revolutionary French workers and students. There were of course floating around the student and revisionist left the same old

(Debray, Mao, Marcuse) theories about the inability of the workers to make the revolution, the workers were corrupted, etc., etc. These prejudices, so dear to the academic Marxists and "Third World" enthusiasts alike, went down the tube precisely on that day the workers began to occupy factories and sequester supervisors, etc.--down, one hopes, mercifully, to be eternally forgotten.

What we urgently need to do now is to study and analyze the history of the origins of the French student-worker movement, what crystallizing tendencies pulled them together, what makes this alliance so unique compared with the majority of the metropolitan areas of the western hemisphere, what sealed the precise relationship between the French workers and students at the flash point. We need to know these things. And we should study the comparisons also--the great gulf that exists between the revolutionary student movement and the workers in the U.S., Britain, Italy and Germany (the workers tear down and burn demonstrators' red flags in Germany; in France, they carry them themselves) but it exists, if at all, in a quite minimal way in France. We are unfortunately not in a position to know very much concretely about the dynamics of this situation as yet, but the lessons which the revolt has to teach student revolutionaries are immense.

### Towards a New Revolutionary Vanguard

Yet tremendously impressive as the French revolt has been to date, it has nevertheless not been great enough; all sources indicate the situation has cooled off somewhat now, and bourgeois order still reigns supreme in France. To carry through the revolution to its end will require a great deal of understanding of class forces on the part of the workers; first of all, they will have to learn the nature of enemy class agents within the working class--social democracy and Stalinism--they must learn how to outflank and expose these enemies, and they must learn ways to split rank-and-file socialist and communist workers from the leadership which betrays them and bring these workers into the revolutionary movement.

If the French students are to assist the workers in the necessary task, they must show they are capable of the job. It is a very difficult piece of work, but it is not unique. It has been done before in the revolutionary movement, and that experience is not only still valid but invaluable.

And the New Left--and SDS--has an equally difficult job before it also, and the question is whether it is capable of doing it. It will take a great deal of dedication, experience, discipline and study--none of these known exactly as SDS long suits. It is not a job which can be accomplished by kamikaze stunts or mindless, head smashing activism, any more than it can be achieved chasing after phony "peace" candidates. It is not an impossible job, but it is difficult, and one can only say, despite a certain amount of charisma and successes, that SDS is only beginning to think of moving in the direction of a commitment to Marxist revolution.

The Spartacist League believes that Lenin's greatest contribution to the world Marxist movement lay in his conception of the "party of the new type", the party conceived as an instrument of the working class, the battering ram against the bourgeois state. The party is necessary not only to draw together the wide range of disparate elements which make up the class, but also because the Marxian conception of socialism has a precondition--the struggle for self-consciousness within the class. This conception, by the way, separates Marxism from all the wretched forms of revisionism which parade before the working class in its name, for it has been the hallmark of revisionism--social democracy, Stalinism, Maoism, Castroism--that it drops the educative role of the struggle for socialism and conceives of the party as an elite thrusting its way into state power over the broken bodies of its beasts of burden, the workers.

During the late years of the civil war in Russia which followed the October Revolution, Trotsky, the founder of the Red Army and along with Lenin the co-founder of the Soviet state, wrote a defense of that state in a bitter polemic with Kautsky, the German Social Democrat. In this defense, titled Terrorism and Communism, he wrote, regarding the party that:

"...the cause of the misfortunes at present experienced by humanity is precisely that the development of the technical command of men over nature has long ago grown ripe for the socialization of economic life. The proletariat has occupied a place in production which completely guarantees its dictatorship, while the most intelligent forces in history--the parties and their leaders--have been discovered to be still under the yoke of the old prejudices, and only fostered a lack of faith among the masses in their own power.... In such conditions, the presence of a revolutionary party, which renders to itself a clear account of the motive forces of the present epoch, and understands the exceptional role amongst those of a revolutionary class; which knows its inexhaustible, but unrevealed powers; which believes in that class and believes in itself; which knows the power of revolutionary method in an epoch of instability of all social relations; which is ready to employ that method and carry it through to the end--the presence of such a party represents a factor of incalculable historical importance."

And this is a fundamental conception for all those who wish to struggle in this society for social change.

The Spartacist League takes its program fundamentally from the document, The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International--"The Transitional Program", written in 1938 largely by Leon Trotsky. Our special focus, one of the many which separate us from the other groups calling themselves--inaccurately--Trotskyist, is our insistence on the political line of "revolutionary integration"; from this flows our particular stress on the need for class unity, for the workers to build a party to administer society according to the aims and needs of the working class. And we would welcome radicals to study our program, to compare it critically with the programs of the other ostensible revolutionary organizations, and to join with us in the struggle for the implementation of that program.

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