

MEMORANDUM ON THE BUILDING OF A REVOLUTIONARY YOUTH MOVEMENT

— submitted by Tim Wohlforth to the
Editorial Board of the YOUNG SOCIALIST

In order to help in the process of clarification of the discussion that is going on nationally among supporters of the YOUNG SOCIALIST we are attempting in this memorandum to spell out the general ideas and perspectives that we, the editorial board, have developed over the last few months. We hope this will be of some help in understanding the present stage of development we are at and the tasks we envision for the coming National Conference of YOUNG SOCIALIST supporters.

The regroupment process among youth has proceeded in a highly favorable direction in the past two years. The main obstacle to the development of a revolutionary socialist youth movement, the Stalinist-dominated Labor Youth League, collapsed as one of the consequences of the crisis in the Communist Party and was dissolved. The best elements in the Young Socialist League resisted the turn of the Shachtman grouping toward the right wing of the Social Democracy and carried through a successful struggle in defense of socialist principles. The youth of the Socialist Workers Party did everything possible to help in this process and a fusion occurred between them and the YSL Left-Wing Caucus. Various independents and former members of the LYL have added their forces to this promising formation. The outstanding achievement in this regroupment process was the consolidation of the nucleus of a new youth leadership on a national scale.

The political capacities of the new coalition of forces was demonstrated in striking fashion by the sureness with which we turned from the internal factional struggle of the YSL to outward-going activities. The national newspaper, the YOUNG SOCIALIST, which we established as the axis of the turn, quickly proved its attractiveness to wide circles of youth, both the radically minded and those first nearing political consciousness. A national conference of broad character, held in Chicago last February, was an outstanding success. A series of militant actions have won the new formation favorable attention and established its serious character in the mind of the radical public as a contender for leadership of the youth. Groupings of various physiognomy, origin and political definition have either been organized or have been attracted to the new polarizing center. In these groupings, whether or not officially, the YOUNG SOCIALIST occupies the center of attention as an ideological guide and source of inspiration.

This promising beginning augurs well for the future, since the opportunities remain great. The Communist Party, hitherto dominant in the field, has proved incapable of emerging from its crisis up to now. Yet the objective need for the organization of the American radical youth is becoming more pressing. The turn in the economic situation and the heightened international crisis are cutting deeply into the thinking of the youth, giving promise of soon yielding a new crop of energetic young radicals impelled in the direction of revolutionary socialism. The opportunities clearly call for a program of expansion.

It would, however, be a mistake of considerable magnitude to believe that the YOUNG SOCIALIST grouping is unchallenged and has a clear field before it. While the Communist Party has as yet been unable to renew its bid for the

radical youth, this situation may not last indefinitely. Meanwhile the consolidation of the Social Democracy, with the inclusion of the Shachtmanites, has provided the Social-Democratic youth with fresh resources. On the campuses they are now attempting a comeback. Their specious appeals to democracy, coupled with the normal revulsion many youth feel toward Stalinist practices in the Soviet bloc, have netted them gains in important areas. This we assess as a manifestation of danger which it would be folly to minimize and which calls for vigorous measures.

The major problem facing the YOUNG SOCIALIST grouping is thus how to respond most effectively to the objective opportunities. The solution to this will carry with it the answer as to the best way of meeting the Social-Democratic challenge.

At bottom the problem is dual in nature. It involves (1) determination of the best organizational structure for the active supporters of the YOUNG SOCIALIST; (2) determination of the most realistic policy of these cadres in relation to public activities and wider groupings in the period now before us. The steady objective remains, as before, construction of a revolutionary socialist youth movement. The immediate steps are viewed as a means to this end.

Finding the best organizational structure for the active supporters of the YOUNG SOCIALIST is not a big question of settling on norms. What is mainly involved is simply strengthening the supporting structure of the monthly newspaper, the ideological focus of the new movement. Regularized sources of income and avenues of distribution are pressing needs.

When the paper was first launched, it was necessary to undertake forced marches, including borrowing funds. Sufficient supporters have now been assembled to make it possible to pass beyond this primitive stage to a more formal organization. Formalization of the skeletal national organization would help considerably to stabilize the newspaper. This in turn would help assure the youth the real independence they require from all adult organizations.

The organizational step now contemplated is actually a modest one, fully in keeping with the real situation. It is proposed that cards be made available to supporters of the YOUNG SOCIALIST. A "supporter" in taking a card signifies agreement with the broad aims of the YOUNG SOCIALIST, undertakes a financial contribution of a minimum of, say, 50 cents a month to sustain the paper, and pledges to do what he can to widen the influence and circulation of the YOUNG SOCIALIST. The category of "supporters" of the YOUNG SOCIALIST, which now appears everywhere in discussions and communications involving the paper, would thus be lifted from organizational amorphousness and converted into something definite.

This step fits in so naturally with the problem of stabilizing the printing and distribution of the YOUNG SOCIALIST that it is felt that the Editorial Board could well undertake it on its own responsibility in view of the postponement of the proposed Labor Day Conference.

A further measure, which we feel should be taken, is the determination of a national leadership to which the Editorial Board in New York would be responsible. It is proposed that this question be settled at a national conference of supporters of the YOUNG SOCIALIST.

Considerable discussion has been devoted to a name for the proposed organization of the supporters of the YOUNG SOCIALIST. This question is regarded by us as of secondary importance. For the search for a name should not be permitted to obscure the modest character of the organizational proposals and make them appear more ambitious than they really are. None of us visualize the present corps of supporters of the YOUNG SOCIALIST as the full-fledged revolutionary socialist youth movement we wish to build no matter what name is given to the contemplated organizational structure. We consider it rather as a step, a small one to be sure, in the direction of building such an organization.

As for the editorial policy of the YOUNG SOCIALIST, it is felt that its definition must be along the lines of revolutionary socialism in its broadest conception. To prove most attractive to awakening youth, the paper has to have definite opinions and the right to take a definite stand on the big issues that affect America and the world. These issues sometimes find acute expression in the minds and feelings of both campus and factory youth, compelling any youth paper that hopes to achieve leadership to state its editorial views. Moreover, the paper must have a central guiding perspective in editorial policy -- the building of a revolutionary socialist youth movement.

At the same time, because it is a youth paper, appealing to a group in society whose political positions are not fully formed and often in considerable flux, it must offer its columns to the most diverse views, thus faithfully reflecting the broad grouping which has already formed around the YOUNG SOCIALIST and which it is hoped can be continually renewed and extended.

The YOUNG SOCIALIST thus constitutes the ideological means for bringing the program of revolutionary socialism to the youth; but this is to be understood not at all as a mechanical presentation but as its living expression, within a definite milieu, concerned about definite issues, at a definite time.

The crystallization of the supporters of the YOUNG SOCIALIST into more definite organizational form does not signify a change of attitude toward the independent, broad, militant (IBM) groups which have already been formed, are in process of formation, or which might be formed in the coming period. In fact, stabilization of the YOUNG SOCIALIST through such means makes it easier to follow an extremely flexible policy in this respect.

At this stage of the development of the revolutionary socialist youth movement in America, the various areas have no choice but to bend with local requirements. The norm on a nation-wide scale should not be to try to impose some general form that in different times and circumstances and with different forces would no doubt be preferable. The norm is to take what exists, including locally preferred forms, and try to link them to the YOUNG SOCIALIST, even though the link may be so tenuous as to involve nothing more than a discussion of articles appearing in the paper.

The key role is played here by the supporters of the YOUNG SOCIALIST. Their task at this stage, particularly in relation to youth connected in one way or another with the Communist Party, is to push the idea of regroupment and of common socialist activity. In wider groupings, different subjects often associated with actions suggested or initiated by the YOUNG SOCIALIST, can be handled in equivalent fashion.

In the final analysis, the IBM groupings, whatever their differences in form and content, are not "front" organizations, but transitional links to the unorganized youth. This is true whether they have been initiated by former adherents of the CP's Labor Youth League, by the YSL Left Wing, by unaffiliated youth, or by youth of the Socialist Workers Party. In view of this fundamental fact, it would be unrealistic to try to convert the IBM groups into the revolutionary socialist movement through some organizational short cut. On the other hand much is to be gained from recognizing that they have genuine reason for existence, that the supporters of the YOUNG SOCIALIST highly value them, believe they perform a necessary and even indispensable function in the development of the youth movement as a whole, including the eventual formation of a revolutionary socialist youth organization, and are doing everything possible to encourage them and to help them in the successful achievement of their projects. In fact, the YOUNG SOCIALIST should stress the activities of these groups, including their discussions, for a considerable time to come.

The development of the YOUNG SOCIALIST grouping has given additional complexity to the problem of the conferences it organizes. In expanding the movement, the conferences are most valuable if they can be made as broad as possible. On the other hand, because of the growth of the cadre forces, need is now felt more acutely for consultation about problems of narrower interest. The contradictory character of the problem was not visualized in all its sharpness when the Labor Day Conference was first projected. Then the conference, which had been presented publicly as a meeting to discuss the possibility of forming a national youth organization, was postponed in response to a request from the field to allow more time for discussion and consultation. It is now clear that the coming national gathering must be of the supporters of the YOUNG SOCIALIST.

The postponement of the conference to the Christmas vacation period allows some five months additional discussion of the questions touched on in this memorandum. It is hoped that this discussion will not be permitted to cut across the intensive activities that are demanded of the YOUNG SOCIALIST grouping in this same period. The objective opportunities are great and it would be regrettable to miss up on any of them because of undue heat over issues that should be settled without too great difficulty in the absence of political differences. The discussion should be kept leisurely and within reason.

--passed unanimously by Editorial board
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