

SDS, the 1960s, and Education for Revolution

Alan J. Spector
Purdue University, Calumet

The trial was a joke. Not that we were innocent, but the trial itself was a joke.

It was 1969. Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) had split and while the Weatherman faction had destroyed the membership list in hopes of destroying the organization, hundreds of student activists tried to keep SDS going. General Electric was on strike. Tens of thousands of workers. Despite the arrogant nonsense of some leftists that the whole working class was racist and fascist, these workers went on strike even as the President of the United States adamantly insisted that the strike would hurt the Vietnam War effort. Still, they went on strike. What the SDS students from Michigan State University, from Central Michigan University, from Alma College and from Western Michigan University did was, in a small way, the very best example of working to build a movement to stop the Vietnam War.

Students went out to support the strikers, not just in Edmore, Michigan, but in many places, offering support and also discussing, as best as we could, the connections between their immediate struggle and the struggle against US imperialist war in Vietnam. The common slogan was: *“Warmaker-Strikebreaker: Smash GE”*. Many workers were receptive and open to discussing the issues; the sincerity of the relationships formed was inspiring. Some workers, of course, resented the students, but overall it was a model for how the anti-war, and hopefully, anti-capitalist movement could thrive and grow.

“They were enraged at the sight of a man wearing a suit. They are against that.” This was the core of the argument used by the prosecutor in Lansing, Michigan at the trial. True, a group of us had forced our way into the room at Michigan State University where a recruiter from General Electric was intending to interview future employees. We said that there was a strike going on, and that General Electric was a war profiteering company, and that they should be stopped. Inside the room there was grappling, pushing, shoving, and both sides were throwing punches. Especially Marshall. Marshall had a roundhouse right hook that could stop a truck. From Belmar, New Jersey, he looked like he could be Tony Soprano’s bodyguard.

The scuffle lasted less than a minute, and then we left. That night we learned that arrest warrants were issued. I took off for Kalamazoo because charges against those who crossed state lines, especially full-time SDS organizers, could be especially severe. I hid out at Rich Gibson’s place for a few days. After the warrants were issued, and my name was apparently not known to them, I came back for the trial. They went after Marshall because he was big and Suzy because she was a strong campus leader. Going after leaders remains a common tactic of the police and courts.

At the trial, the prosecutor tried to explain why there was a scuffle, and the only thing he could come up with was that Marshall was enraged at the sight of a suit jacket. This was particularly bizarre because Marshall often wore a suit jacket, being a child of the early 1950s. When I heard that argument I almost laughed out loud. That was one of the things that helped me to understand that oppressive systems are not necessarily run by “evil geniuses” as we had been taught to regard Hitler and the Nazis. Many of the vicious thugs behind the scenes do have some skill (think Karl Rove), but so many of them are just not very bright. We were there to protest GE, not suits.

It got even more absurd when one of the witnesses testified that Marshall was standing on the other side of the room when one particular person in question was hit. At that point, the prosecutor’s argument came down to asking the jury to believe that Marshall’s arm had detached from his body, flew across the room, and returned to his shoulder. Apparently they did, or else the fix was in, since the jury found them both guilty. Thirty days in the county jail. Suzy did her time, but for reasons that we have never been able to figure out, they never came to arrest Marshall, who stayed in the area and did not go into hiding. Comedy cops.

So, what did this action embody? It was strongly, directly anti-imperialist. It confronted blue collar workers with the idea that they needed to oppose imperialism and it did so in the context of a massive strike, a class struggle, a laboratory for learning and building genuine solidarity among the grassroots, not “coalition-building” with well-paid, corrupt union leaders. Furthermore, it was not non-violent. If militant, unifying struggles such as this had been carried out in hundreds of places, the student anti-war movement would have been able to sink deeper roots into the community and build a broader, deeper movement.

The choices for a movement are not Gandhi or terrorism! It has always been mass militancy or the threat of mass militancy that has been the instrument of social change, but that militancy has to exist to serve the struggle by illuminating the contradictions in order to politically win more people to a higher level of commitment. The elitist pranks, amateur, impotent “terrorism,” have the opposite effect. This mass militancy, on hundreds of campuses, and cities, and picket lines in the 1960s and early 1970s stand in sharp contrast to the twin, often symbiotic strategies of “begging the system” through elections and threatening small-scale terrorism. Both are aimed at the leaders of the system; both have contempt for the grassroots working class people. Not surprisingly, the same people often support both of these elitists, losing strategies.

The Framework

When capitalism was young – vicious, racist, murderous, but still in a productive, growing stage – it was important for the capitalist class to allow, even promote, (somewhat) more accurate analyses of both the “natural” world and the “social” world. Many superstitions (that also had provided support for capitalism’s enemy, the feudal classes) had to be discarded so that technology could move forward, ships could sail, bridges would not collapse and business and industry could be more profitable.

Even now, as capitalism in most of the world is decaying, dependent upon consumption and the manipulation of debt and paper money to provide short-term profits, there are many circumstances where the main wing of the capitalist class needs to promote relatively accurate,

“scientific” analysis of the “natural” world and even of the social world. An obvious example is how so many pro-capitalist (mainstream) economists are now appropriating much of the economic analysis of Marx in their hasty attempt to understand and explain the major economic crisis that exploded/imploded in 2008 – unexpected to them but predicted by many Marxists. Of course they don’t promote the whole of Marxist economic theory; they (and some who call themselves Marxist as well) use some of the analysis of capitalism’s contradictions but stop short of Marx’s revolutionary conclusions, opting instead for some variation of neo-Keynesianism.

Two integrated, overlapping parts of Marxist analysis, epistemology, and pedagogy that occasionally coincide with aspects of pro-capitalist analysis, epistemology and pedagogy are: (a) *disproof by contradiction*, and (b) *learning by doing*. Dialectics and materialism. Using the (mainly white) campus anti-war movement, and especially SDS, as the framework, this essay will explore how these two aspects of Marxist analysis help explain how (positive and negative) lessons of that period impacted so many people at the time, and despite retreats, continue to affect social movements today. Understanding history, grasping theory as the concentrated summary and analysis of experience is also very important.

Without an understanding of the longer trends, the ups and downs and zigs and zags of social processes, one can interpret the experiences in narrow, superficial ways leading to either naïve optimism from short term victories or cynicism and despair from particular defeats. The naïve optimism can have a soft form: “*We won a demand; this system can be made to work; the rich and powerful will listen to us*” or it can have a militant form: “*The Revolution will happen within a year.*” Both lead to an abandonment of developing a long term strategy that is based on sinking deep roots into the oppressed, the working class and its allies, and developing honest relationships with millions as leadership is developed from the grassroots. The cynicism and despair can have a soft form: “*It’s pretty much hopeless so I’m going to just enjoy a more personally comfortable life*” or it can have a harder form: “*It’s hopeless, so I’m going to drop out physically, or mentally with drugs and alcohol, or drown my alienation, try to hide the bad feelings of powerlessness in some other ways based on consumption or exploitation, or commit suicide or shoot some innocent people or blow something up in a blaze of glory.*”

Failure to understand history, failure to grasp how short term victories were overturned and defeats, even long term ones, were also turned around – and failure to understand the class struggle dynamics, including economic and cultural, that lead to these turnarounds—failure to have that long term perspective leads to the short-sightedness of naïve optimism and self-indulgent cynicism. Both shortsighted extremes seem to flourish in times of economic and social crisis. Fascist ideology is an extreme example of this contradiction, whether the right wing in the USA embracing “morality” while denouncing “do-gooders” or the Nazi policy of simultaneously appealing to romantic mythology and distortions of science. It should not be surprising that the same person might flip from one extreme to the other because both extremes offer relief from the stress that comes with experiencing the ups and down of working on a goal and experiencing short term successes and short term failures. There is a relief from stress that can come from exaggerating a success and there is a relief from stress that can come from accepting defeat, but political activists working for long-term global social change on behalf of social justice should not mainly be focused on feeling good for the moment. That is the “Mother of All Opiates” and it is in understanding history and theory as the concentrated summary and

analysis of experiences that a major part of the ability to resist short-term subjectivity can be found.

Theory, by itself, is also inadequate. Learning and understanding theory may be difficult but the form—reading, talking, videos, study groups—is less complex than participating in the class struggle and working to understand the dynamics at work in different situations. There are “theoreticians” who see the working class as the agency of social change but who are personally contemptuous of janitors, secretaries, and taxi drivers. So while theory is the essential force that allows the material of experience to cohere and take form, theory, at its best, ultimately comes from the analysis of experiences. Mao’s short piece, “*On Practice*”, does not offer any unique insights into the relationship of theory and practice; even non-Marxists might agree with most of it. However, it does provide a good, easy to understand framework for understanding the relationship of theory to practice.

This essay is not mainly about theories of long-term social dynamics. There are many other works, deeper and broader than this, that discuss and debate the dynamics of capitalism, profit, accumulation, crisis, and the various political and ideological forms that are related to these dynamics. This essay is more about the practice and therefore, theory, of building a movement against exploitation and oppression. It seeks to emphasize the need for anti-elitist, pro-working class strategy and tactics, with a focus on developing leadership from the ranks of those most exposed to the most intense forms of capitalist exploitation and oppression – victims of imperialism in the poorer countries and racial/ethnic minorities in the rich countries. The importance of female leadership is not an afterthought to this; it is interwoven into the overall struggle to overcome all forms of capitalist/exploitative thought within the movement. The main focus, then, of this piece will not be on broader social theory. The main focus will be on the two points outlined earlier: “learning through experience” and “disproof by contradiction”: materialism and dialectics.

Undialectical thinking leads to seeing the world in a static, unchanging way, oblivious to the stresses at work within that world. As problems/crises emerge, one might either: a) cling fearfully to static illusions about the past (conservative dogmatism); b) conclude that the whole world is changing in chaotic, unpredictable ways and that there is no hope to understand it, but rather to just float along with it (extreme relativism); or c) understand that the problems/crises emerge out of the stresses of the past and can be understood by shedding the illusions of static dogmatism without succumbing to the pseudo-happy despair of extreme relativism.

Ironically, or perhaps understandably, many people in society irrationally oscillate back and forth between “a” and “b,” because while they appear to be Absolute Opposites, they are bound by a common core of inability to tolerate the stresses of embracing contradiction and change. The intensification of both seeming opposites that really took off during the Reagan era (as the economic crisis was taking a clearer form) is an example of this as U.S. society with the implied consent of many leaders embraced side-by-side the explosion of destructive drug use and worship of consumerist selfishness and an attitude of ethical detachment (“...*whatever*...”) alongside the rise of extremist religious politics that claimed to preach asceticism and rejection of material decadence.

In contrast to this, a dialectical approach seeks to understand the forces within contradictions in order to ascertain which aspects of the contradiction are inconsistent with the

realities of a situation. The epistemological approach of grasping contradictions is related to the material realities of how contradictory processes unfold in society, but for our purposes here, we will mainly, though not exclusively, focus on the epistemological – how the direct confrontation with the contradictions of advanced capitalism, and the grasping of the realities that one side of the contradiction was based on illusions that needed to be shed – was central to the development and transformation of the 1960s campus anti-war movement.

Simply put: what turned somewhat patriotic liberal humanists into militant radicals was the realization that “they” (the politicians and corporations and universities and media) *lie, and lie, and lie and lie and lie*. And this realization created not simply opposition, but a strong, bitter opposition based on understanding that they had been used, betrayed. As will be discussed later, the utilization of half-truths and outright lies, abetted by some within the movement, intensified false contradictions and also helped lead to the decline of the campus anti-war movement. The rise of a massive oppositional movement among college students to U.S. imperialism and its subsequent decline came out of the internal contradictions inherent in modern imperialist society (we will use the term “imperialism” here interchangeably with “capitalism” consistent with a Marxist analysis that says that modern imperialism is not simply something capitalism *does*, it is what capitalism *is*).

This essay is informed by my participation and observation in U.S. society, in the campus anti-war and anti-racist movements at the University of Wisconsin in the 1960s, as a full-time travelling organizer and active participant in Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and by participation and analysis of the campus movement as both an activist and a sociology professor over the past few decades. I was arrested a number of times; so were many thousands of other people. That does not make me any sort of hero, but having been immersed in that struggle then, and since then, may help provide some further perspective on all this. The core of this discussion will be on the role that SDS played, with a prelude introducing the socio-cultural-political context and some analysis. This short article, however, can, in no way, be considered any sort of comprehensive history of the 1960s, or SDS, nor even as a memoir. Rather, certain key incidents will be used to illustrate the ways that “learning from experience” and “disproof by contradiction” were important for the processes of learning accurate (and sometimes erroneous) ideas.

Simplistic views of history and social change see major social changes happening suddenly, often supposedly because some “smart, rich, white man” had a “good idea.” DaVinci said: “*Let’s have a Renaissance*” and there was no astronomy anywhere in the world until Galileo, and no opposition to U.S. slavery until Lincoln said: “*We must free the slaves*” and so, different eras came and went – the Roman Empire, the “Dark Ages”, the “discovery of China by Europe and Marco Polo”, “the “Enlightenment”, the supposed invention of democracy by Jefferson, etc. *ad nauseum*. That, too, is how many people, especially young people, view the rebellious 1960s in the USA. “*It came out of nowhere from the sleeping 1950s and disappeared into a haze of marijuana and ex-hippies taking jobs in corporate America.*” Of course, that is nonsense. Qualitative change comes about as a result of the intensification of stresses that are inherent in every situation/process that mature, based on interactions with each other and by outside factors. Within the United States in the 1950s, there were (at least) three major contradictions unfolding into what was to become the political crises of the 1960s and the economic crises from the 1970s to today.

On the economic level, capitalism's cycle of growth, overproduction, stagnation, falling rate of profit, imperialism, international stagnation, inter-imperialist competition and war was unfolding as it has done periodically. This core contradiction, which ultimately affects all the others, was not in a state of immediate crisis in the USA in the 1950s. There was a recession in the late 1950s, but the ability of the capitalist class to acquire huge profits from imperialist investments (exploitation) abroad, as competition from European and Asian capitalists was temporarily weakened, enabled the major corporations in the United States to accede to some of the demands of organized labor, especially as the leadership of organized labor was an important ally of those imperialist policies. The standard of living of the US working class in general, including of the black working class, improved through the mid-1960s, and the economic contradiction would only begin to significantly sharpen in the early 1970s.

On the cultural level, a contradiction emerges when a class society becomes preoccupied with consumption of consumer goods in a way that leads many, including youth, to feel that the opiate of consumption actually increases alienation even as it pretends to assuage it. Various writers and artists in Europe and the US have explored this to some degree, playing with the absurdity of injustice, irrationality, and oppression in a supposedly "advanced" world. From Jonathan Swift to Kafka these themes were explored, and the horrors of World War II, committed by supposedly "advanced civilized nations," fed the interest of some in the public to engage these ideas.

The writings of the Existentialists, Sartre and Camus in particular, captured the interest of many. In the US, the "Beat Generation", and especially Allen Ginsberg, assaulted the bland complacency of affluent America with poetry that combined pathos, anger, and humor. In the midst of all this affluence and optimism, mainstream culture also became "infected" with this critique. A novel, then film, *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*, examined how the pursuit of wealth had its costs in one's humanity. James Dean's role in *Rebel Without a Cause* also fed a cultural questioning about alienation amidst affluence, and a relatively short, somewhat confusing novel about a teenager having a nervous breakdown, captured the imagination of millions of youth. Many who read and reread *The Catcher in the Rye* struggled to understand "what the meaning of the book was all about" but its message of alienation and confusion in the face of hypocrisy and "phoniness" struck a deep chord with many youth.

This cultural critique dovetailed with the political critique. Rebellion does not come merely from exploitation and oppression. Hope, a belief that change is possible, and some sort of vision of a different kind of world is essential for change. Optimism tempered with critique, rather than pessimism, is what leads to rebellion. The McCarthyite suppression of the Communist Party and other leftists may have caused many to question the belief in American "democracy," but by 1960, the attack on McCarthyism by the mainstream politicians (many of whom supported him at first) restored "faith" in the illusion of American democracy. The unions were now safely under the control of the main wing of the capitalist class and the U.S. public had been sufficiently won over to the idea that the USSR was the main enemy of "U.S. democracy" worldwide. The Communist Party, presumably the sharpest domestic critic of U.S. capitalism, itself abetted that illusion-building by openly supporting the Democratic Party.

The horrors inflicted by U.S. imperialism on much of the world were hidden from the American people while the Soviet leaders, themselves, especially Khrushchev, actually helped spread the myth that socialism, except for their "moderate" version, was inherently vicious. A

young Catholic with a boyish smile, Harvard education, and optimistic demeanor had become President, appointing other presumed “intellectual progressives” into his Cabinet. The USA was going into “outer space,” polio was defeated, white folks were leaving crowded cities and buying a piece of America in the suburbs, the Peace Corps was established, and while the threat of war with the USSR over Cuba cast a pall on those early 1960s, the peaceful resolution of that conflict further reinforced the optimism. Perhaps most important though was the economic boom, which seemed to ensure that all the optimism could come true. It was within the context of this optimism that many youth began to explore some cracks in the wall.

The 1960s

The most glaring contradiction in U.S. society in the early 1960s was the persistence of legalized racial segregation and discrimination. A widely read book, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*, also documented the widespread poverty among Appalachian white people. The dominant ideology of that time, consistent with a kind of “anti-working class, racist optimism” was that capitalism was not the problem, but that certain groups were “culturally deprived” for whatever reasons and that with proper education and “uplifting” their lives could be improved and they could contribute more to society. But it was the explicit, legalized discrimination against black people that was the first major crack, the first loose thread which when pulled, exposed the flaws of the whole fabric of society. This was AMERICA – the USA – and people could not eat in restaurants, use washrooms in public buildings, nor even attend public colleges for which they paid taxes? Nor even vote? And dogs were attacking protesters; children were killed in a church?

The assassination of John Kennedy rattled the dream for many, but among many others, there was still the belief that this was not an indication of the absence of democracy. The assassination, on national television, of Lee Harvey Oswald while surrounded by police, did, however, rattle the optimism, the illusion that the USA was an open society, in deeper, more profound ways.

Then, in the fall of 1964, at University of California, Berkeley, hundreds of students were arrested for trying to raise money for civil rights organizations and peacefully sitting in, in defense of that right, and the reality and possibility of widespread student protests became an option for thousands of previously complacent students. There had been other smaller protests – a nearby one against the House Committee on UnAmerican Activities (HUAC) in San Francisco where mainly youth were attacked with fire hoses. In New York City, the Progressive Labor Party (PLP) held a small demonstration against the as-yet small Vietnam War and also played an important role in the Harlem Rebellion, which was the first such rebellion in decades. Other small socialist groups were organizing on different campuses and there were left-liberals critical of aspects of U.S. capitalism that were teaching at major universities. But when thousands of students surrounded that police car in Berkeley and eight hundred were arrested at the sit-in, that was a turning point for the movement. The connection between the black-led civil rights movement in the South and the protests at Berkeley was crucial. Many of the organizers at Berkeley had been trained (“learning by doing and experience”) in the struggles in the South.

This “learning by doing” combined with a profound sense of betrayal at the “contradiction” between the myth of American democracy and the denial of free speech, especially on behalf of oppressed black people, confused and enraged tens of thousands all over

the United States. Not only was the university defending the racists, but the intense physical brutality of the police – beating students, breaking arms, all for a minor “trespass” charge – was like ice water in the face of many youth. The sense of betrayal was all the more intense because so many were saying: *“This is America. With its flaws, it is still the richest, most free country. We trust America. How could America do this to us?”* And that raised questions about what else “America” might be doing.

In the midst of the civil rights protests and the awareness of the reluctance of the federal government to protect basic human rights, the military concocted a lie in the summer of 1964, that a U.S. ship was attacked in international waters by a ship from North Vietnam. Vaguely worded resolutions in Congress and the Senate giving the President open-ended authority to pursue a major war in South Vietnam and North Vietnam were passed overwhelmingly, with little protest from the American people, and the North Vietnamese base from which the non-existent “attack ship” came was bombed. That seemed to be the end of it.

Then in February 1965, President Johnson announced a major escalation of the war, including bombing the supposedly “sovereign” North Vietnam and committing tens of thousands of troops to the war. Lester Radke was a somewhat more left, slightly older activist, a mainstay in the anti-war movement in Madison, Wisconsin in the mid-1960s. Though I valued his insights, I thought he was a bit too pessimistic, too radical, especially when he predicted that the U.S. would have 100,000 troops in Vietnam. It seemed like a radical exaggeration. Lester was wrong. Sort of. Within a few years, the U.S. had over 540,000 troops in Vietnam. This constant escalation amidst optimistic talk was like a series of separate events, each piling on lie on top of lie, further angering the anti-war movement. Within a matter of days, the anti-war movement erupted suddenly and surprised many by its rapid growth. Occasionally influenced by activists from older socialist movements and the Communist Party, they were mainly independent, often with names like: “Committee to End the War in Vietnam”. Demonstrations appeared in dozens of cities, towns, and on many college campuses.

Along with demonstrations came Teach-Ins, which played important roles in exposing the contradictions (lies). At one debate held on the University of Wisconsin campus, a history graduate student argued against a pro-war speaker by presenting what appeared to be a very one-sided anti-imperialist, almost Marxist, argument, citing reason after reason that had all to do with profits and nothing to do with human rights, as the basis for U.S. military intervention in Vietnam. His final words (paraphrased slightly) were: *“Every single sentence in my presentation was taken, word-for-word, and in context, from different articles in the Wall Street Journal.”* The audience, of course, was electrified.

The U.S. government also issued a “White Paper” attempting to prove that the USSR and China were giving massive military aid to the pro-Communist Vietnamese National Liberation Front (NLF) and therefore, attempted to justify the U.S. intervention on that basis. But those pesky footnotes at the end of the government’s own paper indicated that over 98% of the weapons being used by the NLF were made in the U.S.A. and had been captured from U.S. troops by Vietnamese rebels. Exposed to more “disproof by contradiction” and how deeply rooted the lies were, liberal, reformist-minded young people were questioning more and more the very roots of US policy.

SDS Steps to the Front

Students for a Democratic Society came out of an older youth organization based in the social democratic “liberal” wing of the labor movement –the “Student League for Industrial Democracy” or SLID. SDS was founded in June, 1962. Its founding statement, “The Port Huron Statement,” was a manifesto for social justice in the United States. Its emphasis was on opposing racial discrimination in particular and poverty in general, as well as nuclear war, but there was also a strong tone of recognition of the general alienation, even degradation, of life in the affluent U.S.A. For the first three years or so, SDS remained relatively small. Its community organizing project in Newark, New Jersey was perhaps its most notable project, although some SDS members also had gone to the South for civil rights organizing, mainly voter registration.

With the major escalation/bombing in Vietnam in early 1965, SDS called for a national demonstration in Washington, D.C. for April 17. With a Democrat in the White House, and Democratic Party politicians and major union leaders nearly unanimous in support of the war, SDS sharply alienated some of its former allies. The expectation was that a few thousand might show up. Instead, perhaps fifteen to twenty five thousand, mainly college students turned out to protest. With that, SDS chapters began to spring up on many campuses, although in most places they remained relatively small until early 1968. The appeal of SDS was that it was “multi-issue” and therefore “radical” in the sense that by critiquing U.S. society on a number of issues, it opened the door to a criticism of U.S. capitalism in general, rather than just single issues, such as “peace,” which could be discussed as if it was a separate struggle from the core of U.S. society.

The period of the anti-war movement, leading up to the 1968 Democratic National Convention, was one of many local protests by mainly independent campus anti-war groups. There were occasional massive rallies, in particular a huge one in New York City in the summer of 1967. These larger rallies were punctuated with controversy as some in the anti-war movement objected to the presence of otherwise pro-imperialist union leaders and politicians as honored speakers.

Locally, there were many types of activities, some just informational, some more militant. There were disruptive, non-obstructive protests, and outright obstructive protests against military recruiters, against ROTC, against war profiteers, especially Dow Chemical Corporation, and against government officials who came to campus. Many of the peaceful obstructive demonstrations (sit-ins, etc.) were met with severe physical violence on the part of the police. Often the general penalty for “simple trespass” might be a twenty-five dollar fine, but in reality, the penalty was a broken nose, a broken arm, or a concussion. Some protesters were beaten while in jail for relatively minor offenses. These violent attacks on generally peaceful protests further caused young people to question: *“Why is the government going to such extremes? Maybe the problems run much deeper than we originally believed.”*

There were anti-draft protests as well. The argument that most activists in the anti-war movement participated because they did not want to get drafted is a specious argument – college students were exempt in the early years, when hundreds of thousands marched, and women did not get drafted. And then it came out that some colleges were reporting the names of peaceful, legal protesters to local draft boards, who then put those young men at the front of the list to be drafted – and the myth of “free speech” further crumbled. Not only was the war being questioned, but the underlying contradiction between the rhetoric of democracy and the reality of

brutal repression led many away from simple liberalism and towards a radical questioning of the roots of U.S. society – all from this combination of “learning from experience” and the dialectical unfolding/exposing of the contradictions of U.S. capitalism.

By 1967, SDS had made anti-war activities its main focus on many campuses. It was still relatively small on many campuses, overshadowed by the various independent anti-war groups. What SDS had that was different was a multi-issue approach. Some in the anti-war movement opposed bringing other issues into the anti-war movement, but most in SDS saw anti-poverty, civil rights, student rights and anti-war activities as all interconnected and reinforcing. There were numerous tensions within SDS – some based on antagonism among various socialist groups and some based on emphasis. Those whose interest was “student power” sometimes diluted the distinctly pro-working class origins of SDS. In 1966, the Progressive Labor Party decided to encourage some of its campus members to join local SDS chapters. While their numbers were small (and their size was often overestimated by their opponents), they became among the strongest advocates for building a “worker-student alliance.”

This concept was often misunderstood in a narrow, mechanical way. It did not simply mean “strike support,” although that was important. It meant taking a pro-working class approach to all issues – for example, anti-war activities should emphasize how workers and peasants in Vietnam and working class youth in the U.S. were harmed by the war, rather than emphasizing “peace” in an abstract way or individualist tactics to dodge the draft for personal protection. Bringing anti-war ideas to blue collar workers was at least as important as having students support strikes. Campus struggles should focus on anti-racist actions and pro-community actions rather than narrow student rights or demands for more privileges for students. The pro-working class line had significant appeal to many students even as some in the SDS leadership were promoting the idea that social change would come from the “New Working Class” and various other ideas associated, at that time, with Herbert Marcuse, who asserted that most in the working class were so ideologically blinded by capitalist ideology that they were not an important force for positive social change.

In the summer of 1967, major rebellions, often sparked by police brutality, broke out in dozens of U.S. cities. Detroit was the most significant – police were helpless and planes carrying soldiers en route to Vietnam were turned around and sent to Detroit. It took a week for the U.S. government to subdue the hundreds of armed rebels in Detroit. While black workers led that rebellion, many false stereotypes about the rebels continue to be promoted. The rebels were not so-called “lumpen”; most were in their mid-twenties (not youth) and most were employed. This is an especially important point. An unemployed working class person is a working class person, not an “underclass” person. Thousands of white working class people mingled with the black rebels during the rebellion and there was little, if any, generalized “anti-white” violence although the racist myths about that rebellion have been promoted by the media and this myth has become “common” (though untrue) knowledge; the same is true of the rebellion in Los Angeles following the “Rodney King verdict” – the majority of those arrested were not black during those events.

The attempt to portray the vast majority of black people, then and now, as somehow “outside the working class” actually plays into the racist, missionary attitude that sees black people as victimized but weak. The vast majority of black people are working class; the lives and actions and labor of black people have not been outside the capitalist system—it is what the

capitalists in the USA needed and need to sustain their system, the *exploitation* of slaves, of agricultural workers, of textile, and food, and steel, and auto, and health care and other service workers manifests the potential power of the black working class as a leading force in the whole working class. And as Marx, and some feminists, have pointed out, raising children is *work*; it is labor that may not be directly compensated by the capitalist class, unless they are hiring nannies/ au pairs to care for their children, but raising the next generation of people, of workers, is an essential part of the labor that keeps a society functioning.

Categorizing most black people as “outside” the working class, and picturing the “working class” as virtually all white also plays into the politicians’ often expressed racist line of always talking about the needs of the so-called “middle class” as a way to appeal to working class whites and maintain the lie that black people contribute nothing to society but are merely “charity cases.” Being pro-working class necessitates taking a strong position against racist oppression; being anti-racist necessitates taking a strong pro-working class position.

Turning Point

In the spring of 1967, I graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, having been deeply involved in the Committee to End the War in Vietnam and the Wisconsin Draft Resistance Union. I believed it was wrong to accept the 2-S college draft deferment while working class men were forced into the military and wanted to work full time for the anti-war movement in some capacity rather than go to graduate school. I had saved up \$1700 from working for a road construction company that summer and estimated that I could support myself on that for a year. My expectation was that I would be drafted, would refuse, and probably spend a few years in jail. If enough young men went to jail, perhaps that could help end the war.

Along with perhaps 250 other UW students I had attended the 1965 SDS demonstration against the war in Washington, D.C., but did not get involved in the local SDS chapter. In the spring of 1967, I did send in the six dollars and officially joined national SDS but continued to focus on draft resistance instead of SDS. That summer, I saw an advertisement in the SDS newspaper, *New Left Notes*, for a “Regional Traveler” for SDS for the New England region. Wanting to be away from the New York – New Jersey area, but not too far away, Boston seemed to be a good choice. I had a few friends from high school there as well. Under a tree on the campus of Harvard University (from which I had been rejected four years earlier...), I interviewed with the other two regional travelers; one was a member of PLP, the other was an SDS activist in graduate school at Harvard. They “hired” me with the understanding that there was no salary and that I would have to provide my own car and raise money as I traveled for gas and whatever food I couldn’t get from the campus cafeterias. They found me a place to stay. I shared a six-bedroom apartment in Porter Square, Cambridge with two or three others. The total rent was \$85/month. The place was something of a dump and was eventually knocked down. I didn’t spend much time there, maybe two or three days every two weeks.

My route was Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire and occasionally Western and Central Massachusetts, mainly Worcester. T.’s route was Connecticut and Rhode Island while D.’s was the Boston area, which actually had more schools than all of Maine, Vermont, and New Hampshire combined. The responsibilities were to meet with local anti-war activists, assist them in organizing, and encourage them to affiliate their anti-war groups with national SDS, or at least, try to set up an SDS chapter in addition to whatever broader anti-war coalition existed.

There were perhaps twenty campuses on those two routes: Boston through Durham to the University of Maine-Orono and back; Boston through Hanover (Dartmouth) to Burlington down through Middlebury, Bennington, and back, hitting various places along the way.

My parents loaned me a car for a while; later I scraped together enough money for a small car. Generally, someone would find me an empty bed in a dorm, or a couch in someone's apartment, or a spot on the floor for my sleeping bag; occasionally I had to sleep in the car. Local activists generally fed me (compliments of the university cafeterias), and they'd pass a hat for gasoline money to get me to the next place. Two dollars could take me a hundred miles or more. There were many hours driving alone, often through the beautiful New England landscape and, later, the less beautiful Route 20 and various state highways in the Midwest, and there was lots of time to think. Contrary to romantic legends, some of us steered very clear of certain types of personal relationships. The old saying about sailors "A girl in every port" might have been the practice of some traveling organizers, but for many of us, irresponsible relationships could seriously jeopardize building a movement as could marijuana possession and use, which could land someone in jail for ten or twenty years. Having fun with others is an essential part of building good relationships and a strong social movement, but some kinds of fun, in certain contexts, can destroy months of work and even people's lives. Police agencies look for any kind of crack in the movement or even in someone's personal behavior to use against that person or to create discord within organizations.

I would generally arrive on a campus in the early afternoon. In the beginning, I was either blindly looking for activists or trying to locate a local contact/friend/relative of an activist from Boston. Later, as I developed consistent contacts, I'd first meet with a small group that I had closest ties with. That evening there would often be a bigger meeting and then in the morning a wrap up meeting with the smaller group of more experienced/committed activists. Sometimes we would plan demonstrations; sometimes my visit would coincide with a demonstration.

The small meetings would discuss tactics, but mostly politics. We had been taught typical racist, sexist, elitist, anti-working class (and non-working class) history and social science and we were trying to understand the rebellion that was sweeping the world. With some exceptions, today's students in the public schools are not taught much of anything and therefore do not have much of a sense of history at all, living more for the moment (typical in times of crisis) and having little sense that learning history and social science is important. But U.S. capitalism was not as decayed as it is now, so the dominant culture did often emphasize that learning was important and many college students and youth were reading on their own.

We read Marx, and Lenin, and Mao, although we did not necessarily understand it all! We read Malcolm X and *Monthly Review* and reprints from the Radical Education Project. The war was killing thousands every month. This was a stinging reality that we could not forget and that drove us to seek out answers. We wanted to understand what kind of a system could do that and how these policies could be stopped. There were all kinds of study groups. Sometimes they would be led by a moderately leftist professor or graduate student whom we might later critique for not being militant enough, but we learned how to learn even from people and sources with which we had disagreements. We wanted to understand the economic system that created these policies rather than just focusing on personalities.

In my case, my special focus was on building SDS. It made sense that a multi-issue organization that focused on the war but also tied together struggles around many issues was a type of organization that could grow on, and eventually off, the campus and be an important force for positive social change. I carried SDS membership cards everywhere, along with suitcases full of books, pamphlets, leaflets used at other campuses, and copies of various underground newspapers.

Even at some of these relatively small campuses, anti-war demonstrations of fifty or more were not uncommon. Rather than turn this short article into a memoir of those experiences, this information is only included to provide some context to this particular article. Suffice it to say that there were many, many very sincere activists, many from working class backgrounds or semi-professional backgrounds (parents were blue collar or perhaps school teachers) as well as upper-middle income youth at schools such as Bowdoin or Williams; however, another myth about the 1960s' anti-war movement is that all the participants were from wealthy backgrounds.

By late 1967, increasing numbers of Americans were becoming impatient with the way the war was dragging on. In early 1968, the Vietnamese NLF launched the Tet Offensive, a massive assault on U.S. troops that resulted in about 550 US soldiers killed and 2,500 wounded in one week. In March, the U.S. government announced the conscription of another 48,000 men. That same month, Martin Luther King, Jr. was murdered in Memphis and there was another wave of militant anti-police rebellions in dozens of U.S. cities.

In March 1968, a campus struggle in France spread into a general strike of millions of workers against the French government. The impact of that strike cannot be overstated. The possibility, the reality, that students and workers could unite in such a powerful way lent great credence to the idea of worker-student unity in the U.S.A.

In the midst of hundreds of local protests around the United States, the SDS chapter at Columbia University occupied several key university buildings. The demands were focused on anti-war issues but also included more obviously pro-working class/anti-racist demands opposing the construction of a gymnasium that required the destruction of part of the neighborhood. The extreme brutality of the police in arresting the protesters, the film clips on television news of women being dragged down concrete stairs by their hair for the crime of "trespass," the broken arms and bloodied faces at one of America's elite Ivy League universities further polarized the American people and further "disproved by contradiction" the myth that there was merely an imperfect democracy in the U.S.A. that could be made to serve the people and "proved by the realities of active learning" that the breadth and intensity of violent repression was far greater and ran far deeper into the core of U.S. society than many had thought. There is no doubt that 1968 was to be a turning point, and it was only half over.

Although Lyndon Johnson had won the 1964 election with the then-largest landslide in U.S. history, he announced his decision to not seek reelection in the spring of 1968. This gave optimism to liberals and some radicals who believed that the capitalist politicians were backing down on the war and Robert Kennedy then emerged as a supposed "anti-war candidate" and had the lock on the Democratic nomination for President. Like his murdered brother, he had the aura of youth, idealism, and a progressive, humanistic image. Many in the anti-war movement were swept into his campaign and had renewed hope that the system could respond in a way that reassured them that the U.S. really was a democracy. Then he was murdered. Irrespective of

whether he actually did represent a break from the “Establishment” (he did not...), the impact of his murder further demoralized and alienated many thousands. It was in the context, then, of all these events, from summer 1967 to summer 1968, that SDS held its annual convention in Lansing, Michigan in June, 1968.

The Battle within SDS

If the first period of SDS was characterized by community organizing and civil rights work, the second period, roughly 1965-early 1968, was characterized mainly by anti-war activity and a growing tension between the main SDS leadership that promoted the “New Working Class” notion of social change (that intellectuals would lead the struggle for major social transformation) and various forces that supported reaching out to the blue collar community as a way of building a larger, more powerful movement. Labor militancy was on the upsurge alongside black militancy and anti-war student militancy. The communist Progressive Labor Party was something of an enigma to many students. On the one side, they appeared to be “Old Left,” referencing Lenin and Marx, opposing drug use, supporting the idea of discipline rather than “do your own thing,” and generally appearing to be dogmatic to many college youth with middle class ideology. On the other hand, they were as militant as any anarchists were in the front lines in battles with the police, eschewed the Old Left pattern of compromise with “the system,” and actively immersed themselves in the daily struggles of everyday people, consistent with the “Maoist/People’s War” principle. This humility stood in stark contrast to the boldness of PLP’s rhetoric, which appeared to many to be very self-assured to the point of arrogance. But one thing was clear: the pro-working class line was gaining adherents and PLP was growing, though, as mentioned above, its numbers were always smaller than perceived. Some members of PLP also predicted that their opponents within SDS would attempt to force them out.

The summer 1968 SDS convention in Lansing intensified the conflict within SDS. Regardless whether one supported or opposed PLP’s line, it was clear that many in the mainstream leadership of SDS (Carl Davidson, Mike Spiegel, Eric Mann and others soon to be in various Revolutionary Youth Movement (RYM) factions) were acting in unprincipled, even dishonest ways. Odd alliances were struck. Some were attacking PLP on standard “anti-communist” terms – that PLP was “Peking-oriented” or that PLP members were “outside infiltrators who were disloyal to SDS because they had hidden agendas.” But the RYM groups also had their own agendas, as does everyone in every situation. Others were attacking PLP for criticizing Fidel Castro. Some began to speak of the working class but in odd sorts of ways – making comments like: *“Sure, some working class kids can be won over; a lot of them are even smoking dope now.”*

A particularly bizarre moment came when the anarchist group from New York “Up Against the Wall, Motherfuckers” attacked PLP as “Stalinist” and one could see the then-current SDS leadership on the stage applauding enthusiastically, and then one of the members of the SDS leadership attacked PLP for not going along with Stalin’s theories – and one could see the SDS leadership (and the anarchists...) applauding enthusiastically. Was this a principled, honest group? *Disproof by contradiction.*

Then, sure enough, when one speaker attacked PLP from the stage and there was some small grumbling from the audience, Eric Mann came up to the microphone and said: “I sense a groundswell” and egged the crowd on with chants of “PL OUT.” Many in the audience could see

the entire SDS leadership, including such previously respected leaders as Carl Oglesby, who was the main person responsible originally for removing the clause excluding communists, all standing on stage, cheering, pumping their fists into the air chanting “PL-OUT.” Unfortunately for them, there was not a groundswell. The “fascist-posing-as populist” tactic fell flat and the chanting died down and a PLP leader, Jeff Gordon, came to the stage and gave a blistering speech declaring that PLP was actively going to continue to build SDS and had no intention of quitting the organization. This tactic further exposed the 1967-1968 leadership of SDS. Was this a principled, honest group? *Disproof by contradiction. And learning through experience.*

At the Lansing convention, attended by hundreds, there were three candidates for the post of National Education Secretary: Fred Gordon had an intellectual, yet down-to-Earth demeanor, having studied philosophy with Herbert Marcuse. “Les” (Slim) Coleman (now the Rev. Walter Coleman) came from an affluent background but carried himself as if he were a lower income Appalachian white guy. His perpetual toothpick and somewhat exaggerated quasi-working class style of speech gave the appearance of being pro-working class, and apparently over the past forty years he has been active in community organizing – but at the 1968 Lansing convention he was clearly allied with the National Office clique, soon to be led, in name at least by Bernadine Dohrn and Mike Klonsky and whose elitist agenda was far from pro-working class. I was the third candidate for National Education Secretary.

As we each made our speeches, I concluded with the statement that while Coleman appeared to have a position similar to my pro-working class perspective, and while Fred Gordon appeared to have a position more aligned with the intellectual-academic perspective, I did not trust Coleman’s alliance with Dohrn-Klonsky and I was therefore withdrawing and asking all those who might have supported me to instead vote for Fred Gordon. Fred Gordon barely won. At least there would be one person in the leadership who was not fully aligned with the current clique.

The situation within SDS became even more polarized between 1968 and the convention in Chicago in 1969 when SDS split. Most of the new leadership of SDS erroneously believed that if they could imitate PLP’s revolutionary rhetoric, they could fire up their base of support. Mike Klonsky, Bernadine Dohrn, and Fred Gordon were elected National Secretaries. Klonsky and Dohrn gravitated more and more towards revolutionary rhetoric. Fred Gordon was more intellectual and deeply committed to SDS as an organization; he distanced himself from the rhetoric of Klonsky and Dohrn.

Later that summer, thousands of mainly young protesters were attacked in extraordinarily brutal ways during the Democratic Convention. For most of them, the crime was staying in a park after it closed. Police on horses and on foot clubbed hundreds. The police attacked random pedestrians on the street and television cameras captured it all. Mayor Daley’s attempts to blame it on the protesters included holding a press conference showing a golf ball with nails and asserting that this was the kind of “weapon” that protesters were throwing at the police; later investigation revealed that those “weapons” were made by the police for the press conference.

Autumn semester, 1968, marked the beginning of the most militant period on campuses. Opposition to the war was at an all-time high among youth, and interest in SDS in particular had grown remarkably. As others pointed out, hundreds of people attended SDS meetings – not conferences or demonstrations, but meetings – at schools like Harvard, but also at working class

schools like the University of Wisconsin and University of Texas. Demonstrations, big and small, militant and peaceful, were taking place at upper middle-income private colleges in Maine and at inner city schools like CUNY. While the overwhelming majority of SDS activists had no consolidated loyalty to either the Dohrn-Klonsky group or the PLP group, it was clear that those factions would be the focal point of the intensified conflict. The Dohrn-Klonsky group adopted increasingly more violent rhetoric and tried to turn SDS into a revolutionary organization. Interestingly, and contrary to popular perception, PLP did not try to turn SDS into a mirror of itself. PLP's own line had become increasingly critical of Castro, of the leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party, and of nationalism as an ideology, and PLP had other aspects of its line that were not supported by many in SDS, but PLP never tried to force SDS to adopt, for example, its criticisms of Castro or the Vietnamese nor did it try to force SDS into becoming a tightly-knit revolutionary organization.

Ironically, or not, it was the Dohrn-Klonsky group that was trying to make SDS a different kind of organization even as they attacked PLP as "outsiders." PLP, for its part, continued its "base building" strategy of working on local campaigns against the war, supporting urban rebellions, knocking on doors, being militant when they believed it was necessary and trying to build up SDS chapters as SDS chapters. PLP members sometimes set up "Labor Committees" as subcommittees of SDS chapters which mainly did strike support, and PLP also consolidated its base by organizing "Summer Work-Ins," where students took summer jobs, mainly in factories, for the purpose of understanding the conditions and world views of those workers, to bring up anti-war ideas to the workers, and to try to build lasting, real relationships with some of the workers. As a result, despite PLP's radical rhetoric and adherence to some strict political guidelines, many rank-and-file members respected PLP's commitment to doing the work. Even as they criticized the Vietnamese leadership, for example, they continued to work hard against the war, often getting arrested, and were one of few groups that actually sent members into the service to organize against the war from within the military.

By the October 1968 SDS conference in Boulder, Colorado, the polarization had further intensified. The Dohrn-Klonsky group was simultaneously amping up the revolutionary tone of their rhetoric, using more Marxist-sounding phraseology. After the summer Lansing conference, PLP decided to organize a caucus to promote pro-working class ideas and actions and oppose the anti-communist attempts to force PLP out of SDS. The "Worker-Student Alliance Caucus" (WSA) was clearly organized and led by PLP but it did not demand that the WSA Caucus adopt PLP's Marxist-Leninist agenda. Most of the leaders of the WSA Caucus probably were "pro-PLP" but the caucus itself was organized around the strategy of injecting pro-working class ideas into every struggle and building genuine two-way alliances of supporting workers' struggles (usually strikes) and bringing anti-war ideas to workers.

This took the form of introducing and supporting the "Student Labor Action Project" (SLAP) proposal. It had significant support but failed to pass. There was also an intense debate over whether the autumn protests against the war should be in the form of a few large national demonstrations or many smaller local ones. PLP was skeptical about the larger ones, especially because much of the leadership of them tended to be allied with Democratic Party politicians. The debate itself was somewhat confusing as it often took the form of "*Which is better, local organizing or big demonstrations?*" as if there were an Absolute-Correct-For-All-Time answer to that. The combination of inexperience and enthusiasm sometimes leads to dogmatism.

Hundreds of protests, large and small, continued on U.S. campuses in the fall. Senator Eugene McCarthy had picked up the anti-war cause and continued his run for the Presidency as an independent throughout the summer and the fall. The assassination of presumed “peace candidate” Robert Kennedy gave the nomination to Vice President Hubert Humphrey, a major supporter of the Vietnam War. While many on the left were supportive of McCarthy, there also were skeptics. That autumn I was working as the campaign manager for Mike Schwartz, who was running for Congress from Cambridge on the Peace and Freedom Party ticket. We had no hope of winning, but it provided the opportunity to knock on doors and discuss our opposition to the war.

On October 25, Eugene McCarthy came to Boston to give a speech at the Boston Garden Rally for Peace Candidates. Against initial opposition, we prevailed, after some rather forceful demands, and Mike was allowed to speak to the crowd. Outside, SDS members were passing out a leaflet critical of McCarthy and arguing that he was just a “stalking horse” for Humphrey. Many entering the stadium were furious that such an accusation would be made; Schwartz was also critical of McCarthy and many in the crowd booed. As the crowd left the stadium, the radio news broadcasted that Eugene McCarthy announced that he would be voting, not for himself, but for Hubert Humphrey. The sense of betrayal was widespread – more betrayal, more “disproof by contradiction” that moved liberal youth towards disillusionment and towards a radical analysis of U.S. society. Fewer than two weeks later, Richard Nixon won the Presidency.

In November of 1968, students at San Francisco State College (now University) struck the school. Their demands focused on more minority admissions and more courses that taught about history and culture of “racial-ethnic” minorities in the USA and people from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. It was, arguably, the most militant, sustained struggle on any U.S. campus. Day after day, week after week, hundreds of students would get arrested, often beaten brutally, and they would be back on the picket lines the next day. The Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) and the Black Student Union led the strike itself but the local SDS chapter participated fully.

In addition to the quarterly National Council meetings (involving hundreds), SDS also had small monthly National Interim Committee (NIC) meetings, an elected group with meetings of around fifteen people. The NIC was almost completely dominated by members allied with the Dohrn-Klonsky group. Their meetings were often preoccupied with how to deal with PLP, which was growing in influence because they did work very hard against the war, they were often skilled organizers, and their line of reaching out to the community, especially workers, seemed to be the next sensible step for the campus-based anti-war movement to take.

The Dohrn-Klonsky group were poor organizers, generally going around giving speeches but moving more and more towards an elitist “cadre” strategy towards SDS, which included seeing themselves superior to “the masses” of students and working class members of society. However, they seemed to wildly overestimate both the size and the influence of PLP in the organization and appeared to be alternately obsessed with driving PLP out of SDS and with trying to imitate the Marxist-Leninist rhetoric of PLP. While many in SDS had doubts about PLP’s Leninist line, they had serious doubts about the honesty and competence of the main SDS leadership centered on Dohrn-Klonsky.

SDS held another of its quarterly National Council meetings in Ann Arbor, Michigan in December, 1968. Attendance was again higher than at previous conferences. Much of the debating turned into attacks against PLP and counter-attacks by PLP and its allies. At one point, the entire hall was filled with chants and counter-chants. The Dohrn-Klonsky group tried to isolate PLP for its criticisms of Ho Chi Minh and the alliance between the Vietnamese Communist leadership and the USSR by orchestrating a chant: “Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh – the NLF is Gonna Win.” While PLP had published strong criticisms of Ho Chi Minh and the NLF, it had still maintained a high level of anti-war activity, leading militant struggles against ROTC, military recruiting and CIA recruiting on campuses and sending members into the military to organize resistance there. Members and some allies of PLP counter-chanted with “Mao, Mao, Mao Tse-tung” – a reference to the Maoist strategy of guerilla “People’s War” in contrast to the shift in war strategy by the NLF coming out of the alliance with the USSR. To many of the hundreds in the meeting room, however, the chants and counter chants of “Ho Chi Minh” and “Mao Tse-tung” seemed to be completely disconnected from the reality of their organizing on campus. By the end of the Ann Arbor conference, it was clear that there would be escalating conflict between the Dohrn-Klonsky group and those allied with PLP.

Spring, 1969 saw continued campus protests. The SDS newspaper, “*New Left Notes*” was filled more and more with quasi-revolutionary rhetoric and calls to fight in the streets but little in the way of useful organizing material. The spring 1969 National Council meeting in Austin, Texas was not as raucous an event as Ann Arbor had been, but the growing tension was evident. The Dohrn-Klonsky group seized on an aspect of PLP’s line, rejection of nationalism, including black nationalism, and tried to use that to assert that PLP was “racist.” PLP did critique nationalism as an “-ism” but continued its strong, active opposition to racist oppression. Nevertheless, much of that conference was devoted to moving SDS towards a pro-nationalist position in the hopes that it would isolate PLP.

During that spring I continued to travel mainly in New England but also started traveling through Philadelphia and Western Pennsylvania and with a focus on Ohio and Michigan. It was clear to me that there might be a major crisis at the 1969 SDS Convention in Chicago and I was focused on trying to hold SDS together. Whatever mistakes that PLP and WSA might have committed, they were not the ones trying to force SDS to become a smaller, more sectarian organization. I knew that the Dohrn-Klonsky group, and their allies Rudd, Carl Davidson, and others, had uncontested support in much of Ohio-Michigan and I wanted to reach out to the campuses there to promote both a pro-working class outlook and a pro-SDS outlook that saw SDS as a mass organization that could continue to grow much larger. What I found on those campuses was what I had found in New England and later the South – many, many grassroots students from upper-middle income to working class, sincere in their convictions and working hard to end the war.

On one of my trips out of Boston, I had gotten wind that the Harvard SDS chapter would be occupying some buildings and calling for a student strike on the evening of April 10. Returning from Maine, on the morning of April 10, I was riding on the Boston MTA subway system and I noticed a young man of college age, with his arm in a cast. I noticed some other college aged youth with various injuries and thought: “*Oh crap – did they take the building last night?*” They did. And the reaction of the university, typical for its time, was extreme, as police

were called out to clear the building and again, many dozens were brutally beaten while being arrested for the crime of simple trespass.

While only a small percentage of the Harvard student body took part in the occupation, the actions of the university and the police turned popular sentiment against the university. *Time* magazine had as its cover, a full page picture of the students, prominently featuring a leader of Harvard SDS, Jared Israel, with blood covering a side of his face. Jared Israel was also a leader of PLP in Boston, and PLP's major role in organizing the takeover and the subsequent strike could not be denied, as PLP and WSA Caucus members canvassed the dorms, knocked on doors, and passed out tens of thousands of flyers explaining the students' demands against the use of the university to support the war effort. Other demands included opposition to the tearing down of working class housing for Harvard's expansion and a Black Studies program.

Harvard was shut down, completely, for the first time since it was founded in 1636. More importantly, this struggle became a magnet for youth from hundreds of miles around and an inspiration worldwide. While the action was not as large, militant, nor sustained as the actions at many of the working class schools – San Francisco State, University of Wisconsin, and many others – the symbolism of shutting down the pinnacle of capitalist ruling class educational power added to the momentum of the campus anti-war movement and SDS.

As approximately 1500 young people prepared to converge on Chicago for the 1969 SDS Convention, the consciousness on U.S. campuses had reached a new level of quantitative and qualitative opposition to the war. Framing this within the context of Marxist pedagogy is particularly appropriate. As discussed earlier, non-Marxists as well sometimes promote aspects of this pedagogy, but it is consistent with Marxist concepts of dialectics and materialism. The “*disproof by contradiction*” was manifested again and again as the politicians lied about the war, as the mouthpieces of bourgeois democracy defended racist oppression, and as the myth of democracy was contradicted again and again by the extreme overreaction of police. The “*learning by doing*” was manifested again and again as students witnessed and experienced physical abuse for non-violent activities.

Chicago 1969: SDS Splits

There are many fuller accounts of the 1969 SDS Convention in Chicago. In short, the Dohrn-Klonsky leadership and their allies, Mark Rudd, Eric Mann, Carl Davidson, Bob Avakian and others codified their positions around the slogan of Revolutionary Youth Movement (RYM). Dohrn, at this point, had allied herself most closely with Bill Ayers, with the Dohrn-Ayers-Terry Robbins-Rudd group, calling themselves RYM I (later the Weathermen/Weather Underground) advocating turning SDS into a small organization that would carry out surprise violent attacks on anyone they deemed the enemy (which included nearly all “white” people) and the Klonsky-Avakian-Davidson group clustering around RYM II, which also advocated turning SDS into a small, revolutionary-phrase mongering organization, but which paid lip service to making some alliances with some working class white people.

Reasonably reliable estimates put the number of PLP members at that convention at perhaps sixty, with another three hundred or so allied with the Worker-Student Alliance Caucus but not necessarily in total agreement with all aspects of PLP's line. There were perhaps five hundred people there allied, either closely or tenuously, with the various RYM groups. The

remaining seven or eight hundred probably included at least one hundred law enforcement officers (ranging from FBI to Chicago police and various other cops who came with local delegations from around the U.S.) but mainly included hundreds who were not in agreement with PLP's general Marxist-Leninist line, yet who nevertheless did not want to see SDS become a small group of cadre revolutionaries, isolated from the American people.

The RYM group was focused, from the beginning, on forcing PLP out of SDS. From what I could estimate, if the convention had proceeded according to the previous rules of SDS conventions, it is very unlikely that PLP would have "taken over" the organization. Perhaps one or two PLP members might have been elected to a seat on the National Interim Committee, which had a dozen or so members, with perhaps another one or two coming from the WSA caucus. The various RYM groups would likely have also won that many, or more seats, with the remainder coming from the members in the middle. It is highly doubtful that any of the three national secretaries would have been PLP members, although it's possible that one of them might have been from the WSA caucus, possibly from Harvard or San Francisco State. These are only my estimates at the time, but I have always tried to be accurate in matters such as these.

That was not enough for the RYM groups (nor the U.S. government, which doubtless used its agents to foment discord and splits within SDS as it did within many other groups, because they wanted SDS destroyed). The RYM groups were not interested in sharing power, not just with PLP or WSA, but also with the rank-and-file grassroots of SDS. Like the FBI, they too wanted SDS, as the mass-based, grassroots organization, destroyed; they wanted it replaced with a smaller group that they could control.

The chronology of events has been discussed in detail in many other places. The RYM group quickly launched into an attack against PLP for daring to critique the Black Panther Party (even though PLP generally supported the Panthers). But *any* critique of anything the Panthers did, and especially anyone in the Panther leadership, was taken as an attack. PLP also had recently changed its line and now opposed "oppressed group nationalism" including black nationalism. This was taken as "racist", but whether one supports or opposes "oppressed group nationalism," that particular charge was dishonest, since PLP continued to organize against U.S. imperialism and against racist oppression including against any suppression of the Black Panther Party. PLP was also not a "white" organization although its campus work, reflecting much of the anti-war movement, was mainly composed of white students. Furthermore, PLP's pro-working class stance included the recognition that there were millions of black working class people; the "working class" wasn't composed only of the stereotypical "old, white, conservative males" and worker-student alliance did not simply mean demanding higher wages for "old, white, conservative males."

While PLP as an organization was likely more multi-racial than any of the RYM groups, there were aspects of PLP's strategy that did leave it open to criticism. PLP critiqued both Black Studies Programs and "open admissions" to increase black student enrollment on campuses as traps to divert the anti-racist struggle away from militancy and towards building a token black "overseer"- managerial force, but there was sometimes a one-sidedness in the ways that many PLP members argued that case, neglecting the fact that keeping black students out of college was a way to keep the black working class down.

Dohrn and her allies had a plan worked out with some of the members of the Chicago Black Panther Party. They invited a member of the Black Panther Party to speak to the convention. He launched into a major attack on PLP for daring to offer any critique of the Panthers and then started ranting about women's liberation and "pussy power." This sexism was met by chants from PLP, from WSA, and from others: "Fight Male Chauvinism." That stunt clearly lost RYM support from many of the uncommitted, and the RYM group decided, if they hadn't decided already, to go for broke.

The next day, no doubt prearranged by Dohrn and her allies, the Panthers again spoke, demanding that SDS expel PLP from SDS. Included in that demand was a not-so-veiled threat that the Panthers would consider SDS an enemy and "deal with" SDS as a whole if it did not expel PLP. Given all the police agents infiltrating many groups, including RYM and the Panthers, it is not unreasonable to speculate that the hand of the FBI might have been involved in some way, either directly or indirectly, but in any case, RYM wanted total control over a smaller SDS and the Panthers did not want any criticism of any kind.

After the Panther ultimatum, the RYM group went into an adjoining group to discuss what they should do. Perhaps five hundred or so went with them, and another thousand or so remained in the main room and tried to conduct the convention. After meeting separately for a day, the RYM group returned and Dohrn took the stage and announced that PLP was expelled. PLP was concerned that there might be a full scale riot, perhaps provoked by police agents, that would be an excuse for police to raid and crush the whole convention. PLP leaders therefore initially asked their supporters to just sit quietly and not react in any sort of violent way. At that point, however, Jared Israel began going around the convention floor saying that RYM was trying to destroy SDS and that people should say something. It was finally a single loud peal of laughter coming from a woman, who probably could not handle the absurdity of a 35% minority announcing that they were the majority, that single loud burst of laughter that broke the silence. Many hundreds then laughed with derision and then started chanting "SHAME" as the RYM groups walked out.

For me, it was extraordinarily demoralizing, but on the other hand, I was half expecting this. I had a contingency plan, if they walked out, to go up to the empty stage and take the microphone for the purpose of calming the remaining audience. While I was not in the national spotlight as a leader, my work as a traveling organizer especially in New England but also the Midwest probably resulted in fifty or a hundred or so of members there, and more importantly, I was generally seen as somewhat level-headed amidst much of the intense back-and-forth battling over the past two years. I had a close relationship with the Minneapolis chapter and, given the tense atmosphere in the hall, I asked them if they would accompany/protect me from being attacked. The situation at the conference for the past few days was that virtually every speaker from RYM or PLP went up to the stage with a group nearby, a kind of security force. When the Panthers spoke, they too had a security squad, arms folded, standing behind them. I got up to the stage and tried to speak to the tumultuous crowd. RYM had left the room but the crowd was noisy, angry, confused, talking back and forth. All I wanted to do was to say that the overwhelming majority was still in the room, that there was no reason for despair, SDS was not dead, and that if we all stuck together, we could keep the organization going and growing. It was actually meant to be a very short, positive speech.

That's not how it was taken. Many in the crowd, including some from PLP, looked up and saw *another* guy on the stage (me) and wondered what the hell he was doing up there. The crowd was so noisy that hardly anyone could hear me. And perhaps worst in the eyes of many in the audience, my friends from Minnesota had come on stage and were standing behind me, arms folded. Facing front, I couldn't see that, but apparently, it looked like yet another "security squad" from out of nowhere. In retrospect, it must have seemed surreal, especially since I couldn't be heard – just another guy standing at the microphone with *another* security squad seeming to represent what? Another coup? Where did *he* come from? So there were a lot of catcalls and boos, some support, but the pandemonium continued and one guy from Berkeley, actually someone who probably agreed with me on most issues, was yanking on my leg as others tried to force me off the stage. Maybe some of them thought I was a remnant of the RYM group? Again, in retrospect, it seems almost funny, like absurdist theater, but at the time, all I could do was shrug my shoulders and get off the stage with my Minnesota friends.

After that, the convention continued. PLP was the most organized group of the remaining hundreds and more or less shaped the direction of the rest of the conference. Most in the room, whatever their allegiances, were committed to trying to keep SDS afloat. John Pennington from Boston PLP was elected National Secretary along with Pat Forman, a WSA supporter from California, and me, as National Education Secretary. My plan was to keep traveling, visiting campuses and trying to keep the organization together. But RYM had other plans.

RYM quickly imploded into several factions. The RYM I group, later known as the Weathermen/Weather Underground (referred to as "Weathermen" in this article) seized quick control of the split group. The RYM II folks, Davidson, Klonsky, Avakian, Coleman, Noel Ignatin, and their allies did not have the cohesive numbers that the Weathermen had. The Weathermen also just sounded like more *fun!* They wanted to run around in the streets, smoke dope, have a lot of sex, break things, and claim to be the heirs of Che.

The ideological leaders of the Weathermen were probably Bill Ayers and Bernadine Dohrn. Others in the inner circle included Terry Robbins, Jim Mellen, and Ted Gold. Ayers was the consummate manipulator in the style associated with Karl Rove – always self-aware of ways to position himself in power. Robbins, Wilkerson, and others were more naïve, although their naiveté led them to participate in irreparable damage to the struggle. Mark Rudd was a celebrity face because he had been the most well-known leader of the Columbia SDS chapter during the 1968 strike, but he was generally considered to be a lightweight by all sides. He could rant and rave with the loudest of them, but he wasn't much of a strategic thinker. I recall a couple of PLP students from New York saying that the only reason Rudd was chosen chair of the Columbia chapter was because the chapter was hopelessly split between two factions, and both factions (the anti-PL faction and the pro-PL faction) believed that Rudd was not a particularly deep thinker and therefore could possibly be influenced to their side or at least neutralized. There were some other women who were visible: Cathy Wilkerson, Naomi Jaffe, Diana Oughton, Kathy Boudin, but their pseudo-antisexism of opposing "monogamy" often was just another way that macho guys could sexually exploit women.

Others have chronicled the terrible impact that the Weathermen had on the anti-war movement. The RYM II group became inconsequential rather quickly. Coleman went into local Chicago organizing (and some politics), Avakian formed his own cult, now the RCP, which to this day, tries to elevate "Chairman Bob" to the status of Lenin and Marx in embarrassing ways.

Klonsky formed a group (CPML) completely slavish to the Chinese government, even to the point of supporting the CIA funded groups in Angola and Afghanistan because they were anti-Soviet. That group also imploded amidst corruption and confusion and Klonsky, along with Rudd, Ayers, Dohrn, Davidson and the other “super-revolutionaries” can now be found enthusiastically campaigning for supposedly “lesser evil” Democratic Party politicians who support imperialist wars and fascist regimes in places like Honduras and Haiti.

Weatherman Wreckers

There were plenty of ways that the Weathermen damaged the anti-war movement – attacking a high school in Pittsburgh, where some of their female members exposed their breasts to the students (no doubt stimulating the curiosity of some male adolescents although probably not garnering any long term revolutionary comrades), attacking a high school in Michigan, locking the students inside, and the infamous event where Bernadine Dohrn applauded the murder of pregnant actress Sharon Tate by Charles Manson’s gang, joking about how a fork was stuck into her dead body, and nonsense about how “white babies” were even the enemy. The news media played accounts of that over and over again, throughout the United States. (Dohrn now distorts the accurate accounts of her behavior but eyewitnesses there affirm that it was not just a harmless joke). And there were amateurish, childish bombings that did nothing to impede the war, while opposing the building of a mass movement that could have weakened the war effort. Many, including Sale, Lemisch, Ross, and others, have chronicled this. But rather than list all the damaging things that the Weathermen did, there are two in particular that stand out.

They destroyed any chance of SDS becoming reconstituted. It is perversely ironic that Ayers is invited to speak by members of the “new” SDS. They apparently do not know the role that he played in destroying the “old” SDS – an organization with perhaps 100,000 close followers. It was not just the way that he and Dohrn led the split at the convention. Worse, they then took over the National Headquarters and took all the membership records, the names, addresses, contact information for thousands and thousands of SDS activists, and threw them onto a garbage boat so that nobody, *not even their faction*, could ever rebuild the organization. Less than ten months later, Nixon ordered the invasion of Cambodia, hundreds of campuses went up in rebellion, students were killed at Kent State, Jackson State, and were shot on other campuses, resulting in hundreds more campuses going up in rebellion.

Imagine if there had been a national student organization, SDS, to coordinate those activities and to build on the momentum of those activities to further build this huge organization for further anti-war and anti-racist actions! But other than the PL-led SDS group, which struggled to hold remnants of the organization together, there was no SDS. Neither RYM II nor the Weathermen, led by Ayers and Dohrn, had any use for a mass-based organization. Their complete misreading of how revolutions happen (not by a few spoiled brats pretending at revolution) and especially their egotistical arrogance led them to actively destroy SDS when it was needed the most. It could be argued that their destruction of SDS possibly prolonged the war.

The winners often write history; the narrative changes as the forces change. That is not to say that therefore there is no relatively accurate narrative—only that one must take into account the interests of those who are telling the story and seek information from a wide variety of sources. Since the capitalist class, including the “liberal” wing, still has major hegemony over

the media, most of what has been published has been from perspectives that are not challenging to the capitalist order.

Most of the history of SDS has been written either by those who want to assert that support for liberal Democrats is the solution and that the militancy of SDS led to its downfall, or by those who want to romanticize the Weathermen. In the case of Ayers and Dohrn, the two converge. A common theme is that PLP destroyed SDS or was a major reason for its destruction. Whatever mistakes PLP made, it never tried to destroy SDS, nor force SDS to take its Leninist positions. To say that PLP provoked or forced other factions within SDS to adopt destructive pseudo-revolutionary outlooks and practices is as dishonest as when Nixon's associates were convicted of felonies and they argued that student protesters created a culture of lawlessness and that they got caught up in it!

It doesn't take much to tear down a structure, especially with the support of police agents and the capitalist media, and the ability of Ayers, Dohrn, & Company to capture the hearts of some impatient kids, flatter them with delusions that they were the champions of the world and embark on this devastating campaign—aided by the capitalist press which all too happily declared SDS dead and crowned the Weathermen as the leaders of the anti-war movement—all this coalesced into the destruction of SDS ten months before the Cambodia-Kent State uprisings.

As former Weatherman leader, Mark Rudd, now an Obama supporter, has written:

When the U.S. invaded Cambodia in late April, 1970, thereby openly widening the war beyond Vietnam, there was no national student group to coordinate and send resources to the hundreds of protests and demonstrations that broke out. A few days later, when the Ohio National Guard murdered four students at Kent State, and three million students went out on strike, the largest student strike in U.S. history, SDS didn't exist to help inform the millions about the imperialist nature of the war. I myself was sitting useless on a park bench in Philadelphia, having just escaped a run-in with the FBI, reduced to reading in the newspaper about the protests and student strike while contemplating the stupidity of my ideas.

Imagine how the movement might have grown and been sustained in a stronger way for years if SDS, even a faction-ridden SDS, had been able to develop that massive struggle and take it off the campuses with a solid, long-term, grassroots strategy. But there was no membership list.

The second extremely important incident was the “Greenwich Village Townhouse Explosion.” Several members of the Weathermen, including Ted Gold, Diana Oughton, Terry Robbins, Cathy Wilkerson, and Kathy Boudin were in the house at the time. Gold, Oughton, and Robbins were killed. The bomb went off just weeks before the Cambodia-Kent State uprisings.

The best way to understand the profound importance of that event was expressed to me by Bob Ross, one of the early founders of SDS, at a conference in Boston in 2008. Ross passionately explained that the bomb was intended to be an anti-personnel bomb filled with nails. The target was a non-commissioned officers' dance at Fort Dix. (Not a meeting of Pentagon generals – no, a group of corporals, sergeants, and their wives.) A generally accurate paraphrase follows: “*Can you imagine,*” Ross more or less said, “*what would have happened if*

they had been successful with that bomb? With newspapers and television cameras carrying out the bodies of young men, and their wives, perhaps some of them pregnant, with their bodies torn to pieces? Imagine what the impact would have been on the American people!"

The impact would not simply have been more repression from the U.S. government. The work of Clinton, Hart-Rudman, GW Bush, and the Obama administration have put into place mechanisms for crushing political dissent that Nixon could only dream of. No, the impact would have been that the masses of American people would have turned on the protesters – everywhere.

The government would not have had to bother suppressing the movement; the American people would have physically attacked demonstrators all over the USA. Ayers and Robbins were “joined at the hip” – politically and personally inseparable; it is difficult to believe that Ayers did not know of their plans. For anyone to buy the self-serving nonsense that Ayers and Dohrn serve up, alternately romanticizing their egotistical escapades and then playing the “*I don’t recall*” speech so common among capitalist politicians when questioned about details—well, this is not just a matter of wanting to hold grudges from some naïve errors of forty years ago. That’s not the point.

If someone makes an honest admission of the damage done, it does not undo the damage. The damage that the Weathermen did, including Mark Rudd and Cathy Wilkerson, cannot be undone. It was devastating to the entire progressive, left movement, and its effects remain, even today, very costly to the movement against oppression. But at least both Rudd and Wilkerson are reflective enough to where they are not honoring their mistakes and therefore not encouraging others on that path.

Not so Ayers, who one moment makes vague comments about “errors” and then recently appeared at an SDS reunion in Michigan with a jacket that proudly had the word “Weatherman” emblazoned on the back. When someone does not acknowledge, today, fully, what they did in the past, no matter how far back, they are, in a sense, still justifying those acts today. When they tell outright lies, it is even worse. The point is not to hold grudges; the point is to either learn from the past or make the same mistakes again.

There’s a scene in Michael Moore’s documentary *Roger and Me* that is both funny and sad. (There’s much to critique about that film, but this particular scene is memorable.) A group of workers are watching the last automobile roll off an assembly line in Flint, Michigan – the last one because the plant is closing forever at the end of that shift. As the last car rolls off the assembly line, some of the workers are cheering, and one worker says, half smiling to hide his frustration, in a tone that combines pathos, irony, and incredulity, something to the effect of “*Why are they cheering? The plant is closing and they are cheering? Why?*”

Many of us who experienced the murder of SDS have similar feelings of pathos, irony, and incredulity when we see young activists today, most especially those associated with the “New SDS,” but also young activists in general, cheer those who took the membership list of the original SDS and tossed it onto a garbage boat so that nobody could reconstruct the structure of an organization that had hundreds of chapters – just months before the Cambodia-Kent State rebellion of hundreds of thousands erupted, with no leadership to focus it and develop the momentum. And it is not just young activists. Even the important, valuable leftist publication, *Counterpunch*, has carried material applauding the Weathermen and suggesting that today’s activists might follow their example. Perhaps those writers do not understand the factual reality

and are content to dream the bourgeois legend even in the face of critical comments by Rudd, Wilkerson, and others. But romanticism feels better, in the short term, than serious analysis.

The impact of the split was devastating to the whole campus anti-war movement. The lesson of despair and cynicism was learned from experience in a way more powerful than any anti-radical book could convey. And it was a kind of “disproof by contradiction” for many who could not see beneath the surface; it appeared that since the most powerful student organization could collapse so suddenly, the optimism for building a national/international movement seemed disproven.

SDS was gone. RYM II collapsed. The Weathermen stopped using the term SDS. The media, from *The Nation* to *The New York Times* to the conservative media, all announced that SDS was dead, using anti-communist fear propaganda against PLP and anti-violence fear propaganda against RYM. Without addresses, there was no way for those of us to reach out to all those isolated, scattered chapters, many of which disbanded. About nine hundred people stayed in the room after RYM walked out—probably sixty, seventy percent of the convention—but in the coming months, there was just no way to bring it back the way it had been. It wasn’t just quantitative; there had been a strong, optimistic spirit in the organization that affected many tens of thousands, and that was gone.

Some of us tried to keep it going. I continued traveling in the Midwest, mainly Pittsburgh to Minneapolis, meeting with local groups trying to rebuild the organization. John Pennington was the National Secretary who ran the National Office, which was moved to Boston. Pennington at the time was a member of PLP, and with a member of PLP serving as the most visible head of SDS, and with PLP having the strongest, most focused set of forces within the organization, there was a tendency on the part of many uncommitted members of the organization, especially those from campuses who did not attend the convention, to shy away.

There were numerous run-ins with the Weathermen, who were more like drunken fraternity boys having a riot than serious terrorists. It really wasn’t that difficult to set off a bomb in the middle of the night in the USA in 1970; there were not cameras on street lights and stores as there are today, and the antics of the Weathermen had more the character of silly, dangerous pranks than anything that could seriously damage the U.S. government’s war effort. The Weathermen substituted stupid rhetoric, often trying to imitate the way that they thought “ghetto black revolutionaries” talked—it was almost like a racist blackface minstrel show with these spoiled white kids trying to pretend to imitate black revolutionaries.

But they were mostly talk, except for some fly-by-night adventures blowing up unimportant targets. In the spring of 1970, I was travelling through Ohio and stopped in Akron. I had a contact from the University of Toledo whose family lived in Akron. The student, Dave, had called a female friend of his to come over to talk in his parents’ suburban-like neighborhood on the northwest side of Akron. Instead, half a dozen Weathermen burst through the door and started shouting. She had apparently joined the Weathermen.

The Weathermen paced back and forth around the room screaming like drunks, and, of course, trying to imitate the way that they mistakenly believed that black people talked. It was simultaneously funny and a bit terrifying. They were ranting such things as: “*You white mother-country pig think you can come into our town and try to organize? You racist mother-country, reactionary imperialist pig comes here from Boston and you come to our town?*” (The term

“mother country” referred to the imperialist USA.) Back and forth they paced, threatening and menacing, and saying: *“We’re gonna teach you a lesson, motherfucker. You’ll tell your friends to stay out of Ohio.”*

After about ten minutes of this verbal self-love, they asked me something like *“Was there anything you want to say before we beat you up?”* I wasn’t much good at physical fighting and Dave was not a very large fellow. I had been drinking from a small bottle of Coca-Cola, and I grasped at a desperate chance, pumped up my adrenaline and went for broke. So I said something like:

Well, here’s the deal. If we have a fight, you’re gonna win. No doubt about it. There’s six of you and just two of us, and look at Dave and me. Seriously. So when it’s over, you’re gonna walk out of here and we’re gonna be on the floor. But here’s what. I have this Coke bottle in my hand. That means that somebody might lose an eye, or have their hand broken or maybe not have children or something. I don’t know, but it’s gonna cost you. You’ll win, but it’s gonna cost you. And when it’s over, I’ll crawl over to the phone and call my friends from Boston, and they’ll have a hundred people here in Akron within two days, and they will tear this town apart brick by brick and stick by stick until they find every one of you and beat you so bad your heads will be sticking out of your asses. So okay, if you wanna fight, you’ll win today, but you have to decide if it’s worth the cost.

I kept hitting the Coke bottle into the palm of my hand as I spoke, hoping my fear didn’t show. They stood across the room grumbling among themselves and then left, after which I nearly fainted. What a bunch of morons! A Coke bottle? Even I knew that a pillow from the couch could pretty much make the Coke bottle useless. That night I called the SDS office in Boston and told them what happened. Someone on the other end replied: “You know, we wouldn’t have sent anyone to Akron.” “You wouldn’t?” I said, somewhat disappointed, almost hurt. The response was, “No, of course not. We have more important things to do. Look at what’s happening all over the world, violence, dictatorships, war. So someone gets beat up. That’s bad, but we’re not going to drop everything and send a hundred people to Ohio just because someone gets beat up.”

I guess it made sense, and it was an education, of sorts for me, to get my head back in the real world. The main point here is not that I did anything heroic—not at all. The main point is that the Weathermen were mainly just a bunch of cowardly punks whose supposed “heroism” came from a few easy bombings in the night and physical attacks on opponents they perceived of as weaker (although they lost some of those fights as well.) The Weathermen’s bark was much worse than their bite, and it was exactly what the U.S. government needed; as Mark Rudd has written, “We couldn’t have done the FBI’s work better for them had we been paid agents, which I know we weren’t.”

Well, maybe he wasn’t. Various police and ruling class agencies have a variety of ways of influencing the movement. It is not all “secret agents” and provocateurs; it is sometimes just having informal allies tied to various subgroupings within the ruling class. Rudd probably was not tied to any of them; whether any of the other Weathermen were remains to be learned.

A footnote of sorts: some weeks later, another guy from the East Coast was travelling through the Akron-Kent area, and this time, that group jumped him and beat him up, although he apparently gave as well as got. As they attacked him, they told him that they had been criticized by their leader, Terry Robbins, for letting me go, and that if they saw me again, they were supposed to put me in the hospital for a long time. I only mention this because it was only a short time later that the Greenwich Village townhouse was blown up by the Weathermen. I was reading the story in the newspaper and saw that Terry Robbins was among the group that had been killed in their explosion. A very strange emotional feeling washed over me. Normally, I would be upset, cringe, have a little wave of sadness that a person gets whenever anyone dies, even someone that you dislike. But in this case, I just had a kind of “whatever” attitude—here was a guy who ordered his comrades to put me in the hospital for a long time and who had just beaten up another guy. So it was very weird. I was almost surprised, angry with myself for not being sad, and then I realized that this was the real world and that you can’t love the people who do so much damage to others.

After listening to Bob Ross’s explanation, I can even take that a step further. If they had not blown themselves up, they might have blown up a bus on the expressway or maybe some passersby on the street or maybe even gotten it onto that base. There’s a real world out there and those who go on and on talking about revolution should seriously grasp the often-repeated phrase about a revolution not being a tea party. Life in the inner city for millions, life in Haiti, India, Ecuador, Malawi, life in many places isn’t a tea party and, as a friend of mine from Gary says: “That’s why they call it a struggle.” There’s a real world out there.

So we tried to keep SDS going. (References to “SDS” from here on refer to those who remained in the convention, as opposed to the various RYM groupings who abandoned the term “SDS”.) SDS played an important role at Dartmouth and some other campuses, including a demonstration involving thousands in Berkeley, but 1969-1970 started out a quieter year than 1968-1969. The media blitz about SDS being “dead and gone, except for some crazies” had a powerful effect as did the wave of drugs that swept over campuses often with the passive consent of various government agencies. A few massive demonstrations, strike support for General Electric workers, and later General Motors and the Post Office had major strikes. Black students were taking more of the lead in campus struggles. Then came the invasion of Cambodia and the killings at Kent State and Jackson State.

The Cambodia invasion and rebellions surrounding them as well as the killings at Kent State and Jackson State and shootings on other campuses caused the massive eruption that shut many campuses for the remainder of the year. Boston-based SDS continued to be active in the anti-war movement but moved towards becoming focused on a campaign called the “Campus Worker-Student Alliance.”

The CWSA was seen as a way to actually make the language of “Worker-Student Alliance” become a reality if students actually had ties with actual workers on a consistent basis; it was a reasonable extension of the WSA, but it was probably done in an imbalanced way. A much more detailed account of how the remnants of SDS tried to function as been discussed in more depth in Alan Adelson’s “SDS: A Profile,” and there is no point in detailing every incident here. It is more important to discuss the meaning of those times.

There were a combination of factors that prevented SDS in 1969-1973 from taking root and thriving. Foremost were the limits of the situation: the split at the 1969 SDS convention, the lack of membership records, and the intensive media campaign pushing scare campaigns about the Weathermen, anti-communism about PLP, and general demoralization had a powerful impact. So too was the welcome Nixon got in China, which confused many socialists and other leftists, since Nixon could not get a welcome in any U.S. city! The Vietnam War appeared to be winding down, although there was a significant, short-lived outburst of protest when Nixon-Kissinger authorized the bombing of Hanoi-Haiphong.

The Democratic Party nomination of George McGovern gave hope to many and siphoned off much of the anger; the combination of “carrot (McGovern) and stick (repression)” as well as the rise in unemployment all took their toll. Furthermore, many in the government concluded that they would rather tolerate the “cultural rebellion” of the Woodstock generation, (psychoactive drugs, opposition to dress codes, less repression of sexuality). Finally, it could be argued that because PLP had become the dominant force within what was left of SDS after the split and the lack of membership records that could have allowed the organization to broaden out, the perception was very strong that joining SDS now meant basically being in an organization that would follow PLP’s line. Some of PLP’s predictions did not come true: impending war between the USSR and the U.S.A. and the strategy of standing outside activities and organizations can be isolation. Some of PLP’s predictions did come true: the blood of millions of Vietnamese and others has been squandered as the once-communist Vietnamese government embraces U.S. capitalism and Cuba moves that way, China embraces capitalism and carries out imperialist policies in Africa, and most national liberation struggles, whether in South Africa, the U.S.A., or elsewhere, became vehicles for small groups of ex-rebels to become the new capitalist exploiters and partners of today. But the ways that debates were often carried out tended to focus on “what was wrong with someone else’s position” to the exclusion of “how can we develop struggles that illuminate the differences and learn which perspective is more accurate.” There is a lot at stake in having a more accurate analysis; the collapse of the heroic struggles in the USSR, China, Vietnam, Cuba, and elsewhere demonstrate how the lives of millions of heroic rebels can be wasted. Critiquing the line and consolidated leadership of various movements is essential. The struggle over “line” is not just some abstract theoretical issue for intellectuals. But when struggling among the grassroots, the debates are more fruitful when carried out in the context of actual struggle, rather than simply making verbal declarations and asking someone to “take it or leave it.” People who are open to learning learn through a combination of words and experiences and effective leaders understand and respect the complex ways that people learn.

The seeming “*disproof by contradiction*” (Can our rebellion change the system? Apparently not...) combined with the *material experience lessons* of massive police and court repression including the Chicago 8 trial, police and government killings of students and of activists in the black community—these were not just stories in books; these were palpable. Incorrect lessons are also learned through experience and short-term experiences without a long-term perspective can often shape a person, or a movement’s attitude.

If those were the external limits, what were the internal contradictions, the decisions, and the choices that movement activists made that also limited the ability of the student movement, and SDS, to thrive? There were several interrelated errors that severely weakened the campus anti-war movement from within. Putting aside the antics of the Weathermen, who actually put

themselves outside the movement, it was the inability of SDS to broaden out its line to the community and the weaknesses/erroneous perceptions, analysis, and strategy in the struggle against racist oppression. Call it “worker-student alliance” or “community outreach” or anything similar, the inability of the campus anti-war movement to sufficiently engage the off-campus community not only weakened the anti-war movement at any given time, it also left the students unprepared for how to function when they would leave the campus.

As others have written, after thousands of protests, some involving hundreds of thousands of people in one place—after shutting down hundreds of campuses, driving the military off campus, facing armed police and soldiers, the movement had to transform. It could either intensify its militancy without broadening its base or it could broaden its base. Broadening the base does not have to mean diluting the politics; it should mean taking the politics to others that might not agree. People have contradictory ideas tugging at them, contradictory perceptions, contradictory impulses, and contradictory philosophies. Fully integrating our lives with the lives of others with whom we might have disagreements on some points and learning from others while struggling with others is the only way to integrate the activist movement into the broader population. “Struggling with others” should not mean “shouting at others” or insisting that they immediately agree with the “logic” and the “evidence” that are offered in words. People believe what they believe not simply based on the “logic” of the theory but on the ways that they believe various ideas relate to their lives.

Participating with others in everyday struggles—for a stop sign, against unfair school policies, supporting strikes, opposing police brutality, demanding services from the government, and even helping others deal with problems that appear to be merely “personal,” such as family problems—all these can become what Lenin called “schools” which can more powerfully illuminate what capitalism is “made of” and what the anti-capitalist movement is “made of,” building solidarity and trust. The “worker-student alliance” made some small steps in that regard, but it was inadequate and sometimes artificially done. Nevertheless, there were those who tried to implement the outreach.

Of course, to some, “outreach” meant diluting one’s politics and becoming a Democratic Party activist, but there were many thousands of others who did not abandon their philosophies, becoming social workers, teachers, labor activists, community activists, medical workers, hoping to implement their humanistic philosophies despite the decline of the movement. But the movement itself, as an organized force, continued to decline. Some big protests against Reagan’s assault on the labor movement, some solidarity demonstrations in opposition to U.S. government support for fascist regimes in Central America in the 1980s kept the flame of organized opposition flickering, but it was not until the major attack on Iraq in 2003 that the movement erupted again in such large numbers.

If the organized campus movement had been able to maintain its *organization* throughout those decades and extend the grassroots militancy in an organized way to the broader population, the movement would be much more powerful today. The pressures on young people when they leave college can be intense; one has to learn how to be an effective organizer with only a few available minutes on many jobs, as opposed to the hours that students often had while on campus. Adjustments to jobs, to families, to economic stresses can all intensify the “take care of the moment” mentality. It is not inevitable. Many students in other countries maintain their activism when they leave the campuses, and many in the U.S. do, but many, many do not. In the

case of the 1960s campus anti-war movement, this was not simply because of the specific stresses mentioned above but also, perhaps mainly, because the students were not adequately mentally-politically prepared to integrate their political philosophies into the lives of “everyday” (working class and semi-professional) people. Understanding this politically as students and having “flesh-and-blood” genuine relationships with off-campus people while still students, are crucial.

Related to this is the extreme racial segregation within the movement that was the result both of the pre-existing racial segregation in U.S. society and the inability of the white students to build genuine, honest relationships with black students and workers, the latter which was masked by leftist theories about “self-determination.” There were many small exceptions on many campuses, and many major struggles did build grassroots alliances (two especially significant ones were the San Francisco State and the City University of New York struggles).

Often, though, either issues of racist oppression were ignored, or they were seen as some kind of separate struggle. Within the movement, the concept of “self-determination,” still strong today, resulted in “coalitions at the top” where leaders of different groups discussed “coordinating” activities rather than having the grassroots members develop the deep, genuine unity and solidarity on a personal basis that is essential to having unbreakable unity. SDS before and after the 1969 Split was basically a “white student” organization. It often lent support to the increasing numbers of struggles led by black students, and later Latino students, starting especially in 1969, but it was often of the “support coalition” type, rather than genuine solidarity based on personal ties.

Virtually all the groups, including the Marxist groups, believed that “self-determination” meant that “black people should determine their own destiny,” which in practice meant that “white people had no right to criticize what any black leader said or did.” The problem with this was several-fold. First, it created fiefdoms within the movement, where various leaders had their own positions of power to protect. Second, it was contradictory, because there were black people who criticized other black people—how could a white person agree with both of them? This non-class analysis of racist oppression created huge contradictions within the minds of white students, but it also conveniently allowed many of them to give in to the racist impulses towards separatism that were a part of their upbringing within the traditional racism of U.S. society. Saying: “It’s not my place to criticize or even comment” becomes a way to avoid the discomfort of struggle. Many white students found themselves arguing with other white students who proposed deferring to particular leaders and saying, in return, “But I know some black people who have a different analysis. Shouldn’t we therefore, try to figure some of this out?”

Finally, as a consequence, it promoted a culture of dishonesty. Struggle, even criticism, after all, is not an insult or inconvenience. It can be the highest form of compliment, while deferring can actually be a kind of insult by implying that members of “other racial-ethnic groups” cannot be treated as equals but rather have to be treated as if they were hyper-sensitive weaklings. PLP, which was a multi-racial group, and some others as well, moved away from the Absolute Uncritical position and found themselves the target of attacks both from some of the black and Latino nationalist leaders and from some of the white leaders whose fear of struggle caused them to obsequiously tail after virtually every black leader, no matter if that person contradicted the person they had been tailing after the day before. This attitude, which many honest white students also had, maintained the wall of separation and distrust. Distrust can only

be overcome through honest, direct, respectful struggle; feigning agreement and being afraid to be genuine not only corrupts the thinking of the white folks, it also often intensifies feelings of mistrust among everyone.

SDS, after the split, did try to broaden and take the struggle against racist oppression more seriously. Despite the myth, discussed earlier, that PLP was trying to “take over” SDS, the reality is that PLP did not force the core of its line on SDS. Divergent points of view were respected, attempts were made to reach out to the community, and SDS, at that point, made a genuine effort to broaden the organization. But there were mistakes that also limited the ability of SDS to maintain itself, even with its now limited membership and even within the context of the enormous limiting factors discussed earlier. Withdrawal from some of the important anti-war activities limited SDS in its attempts to rebuild the organization. The Campus Worker Student Alliance strategy, while important in encouraging the development of genuine personal ties between students and workers, was sometimes carried out in narrow ways that limited the growth of the organization. However, even if there had been no mistakes, it likely would have been the reality that SDS could not have been maintained. The external pressures created limits that made it unlikely that a mass organization named “SDS” could have been sustained.

How then, to summarize the lessons and more effectively employ “learning through contradiction” and “learning through experience” in the building of a broad, anti-capitalist movement? Such a movement needs a long-term approach. Virtually ALL the organizations, and many of the activists, did have the notion that some sort of “revolution” in the U.S.A. was, at the most, a few decades away, and likely sooner.

As a related point: it is disheartening to learn that something like twenty-five percent of the U.S. population believes some version of Biblical prophecy that the Earth will be destroyed by God *in their lifetime*. *In their lifetime?* It is one thing to accept that general prediction, but why *in their lifetimes?* How do they know that so precisely? There have been seventy or eighty generations since Jesus Christ supposedly walked the Earth – why do so many people believe that the change is coming now? Obviously immediate events are more palpable than long-term theories. As a parallel thought, one needs to understand that the struggle of oppressed classes has gone on for perhaps ten thousand years – maybe three or four hundred generations. Why would revolutionary activists believe that the class struggle would be won within a few short decades – their very own lifetimes?

The late 1960s were very intense in the U.S.A. and Western Europe, and there are moments in history where great advances can take place and lasting defeats can happen. This is becoming truer as globalization has given capitalism less room to expand and economic, political, and environmental contradictions will intensify globally as never before. It is important to be aware of that, but it is important to also understand that there have been, and will continue to be complex zigs and zags, victories and defeats, exactly because humans are complex individuals and societies are even more complex and that learning does not come from words alone. The intensity of that moment—at least in the U.S.A. and much of Western Europe—led to an impatience and short-sighted analysis that underestimated the complexity and difficulty of the huge struggle to change the world; it probably also underestimated how complex people’s thinking can be, and that people learn from experience rather than only from well-formed arguments. The urgency of the moment can lead into a strategy of emphasizing the “words”

approach over the “build a deep base and be integrated with the people” approach. Of course words are important, but words have to be brought to life.

Related to this is understanding that people have contradictory ideas and that it is the responsibility of a social movement’s organizer to help illuminate those contradictions and sharpen them, both with words and experiences, so that we all become aware of the consequences of the choices that we, and the movement, make. Some contradictions are important but secondary, but dogmatism can lead an activist to debating these secondary issues. One has to look at potential, which means truly grasping what the core of someone’s beliefs are, rather than just some of their words. There are many religious people, for example, who may be more open to progressive social change than many atheists, and if an atheist activist is sincere, she or he will need to get to know people deeply by getting involved in the lives of others. Similarly, someone might have illusions about the Democratic Party but have more potential to grow than cynics who hate all politicians but allow elitist, arrogant ideas to fester within their consciousness. Preaching from a distance might feel satisfying, but it generally leads nowhere.

Related to all this is honesty. Don’t inflate the numbers when reporting an activity. Don’t pretend that the situation is better than it is. Don’t paper over differences of opinions. Sometimes one has to say, in a respectful manner, that a disagreement will have to be discussed later when more information comes in, but pretending to agree (unless dealing with an enemy) is a mistake that hurts the struggle later.

The core of all this is “relying on the people”—the grassroots, as we seek to build strong, effective organizations. Relying on the people, the working class and its allies among semi-professionals, and even some professionals, means not relying on the capitalists. Another error related to this was relying too much on the capitalist media to promote the activities of the movement. By 1968, a major section of the capitalist class was beginning to move towards a position of winding down the Vietnam War, and their media seemed to report every protest of five or more people from New York to Pocatello, Idaho. Relying on them to build our movement creates a dependency; the news blackouts of protests often involving hundreds in the 1980s and even today are evidence of that.

Even today, many progressive activists lament the conservative media and pine for the day when the left can have more influence on television and radio. That would be better, of course, but it is not the main problem. The conservative movement in the post-1980s U.S.A. did not grow mainly because of the media. It grew through the churches, block clubs, PTAs, community organizations, where conservative activists did face-to-face work with hundreds of thousands of people, everything from conservative religious classes to sports leagues and marriage counseling. It is the approach used by Hamas to further their nationalistic aims, and anti-capitalist forces in Vietnam and in China, most notably, also effectively used it. In order for the movement to grow by more than “ones and twos” it must first grow by ones and twos, and the lack of trust generated by capitalist ideology and the ways that capitalist society structures our lives and therefore our thoughts can only be overcome by developing relationships and activities that structure all our lives and thoughts in cooperative, humanistic ways so that our militant actions will be carried out by the grassroots and not by a few self-appointed egotists such as the Weathermen.

Opposing elitism does not necessarily mean opposing organization or even leaders, but leaders should be held to a higher standard, not given higher privilege, and all forms of cultism have to be rejected. The kind of individual terrorism may appear to be the opposite of tepid, weak electoral reformism, but in fact it is the same. The term “liberals with guns” refers to the similarity between wanting social change by changing a few leaders at the top via elections and changing a few leaders at the top through assassination. Neither leads to positive, lasting social change.

Relying on the people means being aware of the ways that elitist ideas penetrate and saturate the progressive movement itself. The struggle to develop more female leadership includes both the struggle against sexist oppression in society and against sexist ideas and practices within the movement. These ideas are very deeply rooted in history and will not just disappear with some preaching or sincerely proclamations of one’s presumed sins. And perhaps a major Achilles’ heel of the progressive movement is the failure to address and oppose all forms of racist discrimination and ideology.

All forms of oppression are not identical, although all are deadly. There is, however, a particular commonality involving discrimination based on perceived (invented) “physical races,” ethnic/cultural/language groups, caste, and often, religion. Whether “dalits,” Muslims, or “tribals” in India, Roma (so-called “gypsies”) in Italy, Hungary, or the Czech Republic, darker skin-toned people in Russia, indigenous and black people in Latin America and the Caribbean, or in a thousand other places, Canada, Australia, Britain, Western and Eastern Europe—these must be directly opposed. Any passivity in the face of this only leads to a severely weakened movement, deprived of the leadership of people whose experiences have tempered them into insightful, committed leaders.

In the U.S., this has obviously meant opposing the oppression of African-American descendants of slaves. Increasingly, this has also meant opposing discrimination against Latinos, most especially undocumented immigrants. Native Americans continue to experience crushing oppression, and discrimination against working class Asians exists in the workplace as anti-Muslim discrimination (with collateral damage to Hindus and Sikhs) has intensified as U.S. and Euro capitalism feel threatened by the growing nationalism in some parts of the world. Opposing this racism and building these ties is key also to building our “globalization from below” movement to counter the capitalists “globalization from above.” These ties, and not simply calling conferences where delegates from various leftist groups discuss issues, will form the core of a global movement for social justice and equality.

The campus anti-war movement of the 1960s, including SDS, did try to address issues of racist oppression, but the failure to fight through on this one hundred percent and the failure to build solid, genuine, deeply developed personal ties was a fatal problem then and remains a problem today. If the young progressive, anti-imperialist, anti-sexist, anti-racist, pro-working class activists of today hope to build a movement that transcends the campus anti-war movement of the 1960s, including SDS, which did “rock the house” with hundreds of thousands of supporters, it will have to confront and reject the pro-capitalist ideas of egotism, romanticism, elitism and separatism—learning from the successes but unflinchingly rejecting what was corrosive to the movement. Learning through the struggle over contradictory ideas and learning through experience are how a movement is built. Romanticizing might feel good, but it is the gateway to elitism that is the opposite of the egalitarian world that we seek.

Some Notes, Sources & References

This article is currently being developed into a book length piece with many more examples and experiences. It is about thirty years late. Many people, of different leftist persuasions, have asked me to record this perspective on the events of that era. I hesitated for two reasons.

First, I was not sure how to write it without it being about “me” – “*I did this, and then I saw that and then I went here and then I said that and then I, I, I, I.*” My decision to be a full time organizer was not typical, but it was certainly not heroic. The Vietnamese people were heroic. U.S. soldiers who resisted orders or even actively tried to stop the war effort were heroic. A community or labor organizer in Asia, Africa, or Latin America who risks government fascism, corporation-hired mercenaries, and death squads to protect the local people is heroic. A worker who goes to a dreary, perhaps dangerous job, day after day, year after year, in order to provide for a family is heroic. A single mother in poverty doing her best to raise children is heroic. So were many thousands of other people. And there were many participants of that movement who went on to do brave, unselfish things—giving up comfort for jobs for the rest of their lives that would enable them to better serve humanity. This memoir is meant to respect and honor the many thousands of people then, and since then, who contribute to the struggle for social justice and to oppose the myth that the campus-based anti-war movement was composed of wealthy, spoiled, selfish brats who just wanted to have fun and avoid the draft. The hope is that this perspective, missing from most of the accounts of that period, can give readers a more accurate feel for what was more typically the experiences of the rank-and-file thousands of that movement.

Second, there were serious concerns about “outing” people. Many participants may not wish to have their actions made public, many of which were done in private without the expectation that someone would put it in an article or book. This has been an especially serious concern. The solution was to use the full names of people when they have given permission or when their actions have already been part of the easily accessible public record, and to use first names or initials for those with whom I have not been in contact. They may recognize themselves but presumably, hopefully, anyone else who recognizes them already knows their stories.

I have done my best to be accurate in all my descriptions. My *analysis* of those events is not neutral. There is no neutrality. Asserting that there is no neutrality does not mean that every account is as accurate as every other account. The core of my perspective then, and now, however, shapes the analysis, of building a mass-based, grassroots, multi-issue movement that can concretize both anti-elitism and strong leadership. This movement must ensure that the membership and leadership of that movement is disproportionately composed of those from groups whose intense exploitation and oppression have developed them into strong, wise leaders. As part of this attempt at accuracy, I have tried to avoid personal attacks, except insofar as those critiques of character are interwoven with behaviors. Ridiculing someone’s name, as Sale does in his book “SDS,” or mocking someone because his or her parents were affluent is tedious and irrelevant. If someone is posturing and egotistically creating a fake “show-biz” image, that is certainly liable to criticism, however. I invite, welcome, corrections of any factual errors that might be in this manuscript.

I also welcome comments from anyone with information or ideas, and most especially those who worked with me during those years, to help make the book-length story a fuller, more accurate account of those events.

Sources & References

A forum sponsored by the journal *Platypus* on November 9, 2010 has comments and analysis by Mark Rudd, Osha Neumann (one of the members of the anarchist faction “Up Against The Wall, Motherfuckers”), Tim Wohlforth (an activist in the Young Socialist Alliance during the 1960s) and me. Although it might be a bit more difficult, I recommend listening to the recording, available at the website. The written transcript can be found there as well, but it does have some inaccuracies. See: <http://platypus1917.org/2010/12/01/rethinking-the-new-left/>

The most detailed account of the development and decline of SDS can be found in Kirkpatrick Sale’s encyclopedic work: *SDS* (Vintage Books, 1974). It is currently out of print; used copies are available and the entire text is available on the internet at: http://www.antiauthoritarian.net/sds_wuo/sds_documents/sds_kirkpatrick_sale.pdf

While Sale’s chronology of events is generally accurate, he colors his analysis with his own perspective, a combination of libertarianism and “decentralism.” Authors have a right to their analysis, and critics have a right to critique that analysis. Interwoven with his chronology are such gems as mocking the names of activists and reinforcing the hearsay stereotyped impressions of others.

An interesting, if impressionistic, account of the practice of SDS after the split can be found in *SDS: A Profile*, by Alan Adelson (Charles Scribner’s Sons; First Edition 1972).

Post-split SDS, based in Boston, had a useful pamphlet: “Who are the Bombers: Often the Rulers,” available at this website: <http://archive.org/details/WhoAreTheBombersOftenTheRulers>. This copy is not in perfect form; other versions may be available in university archives.

One can find PLP’s perspective on that period in various articles that have appeared on their website: plp.org and in an anonymous article “The Rise and Fall of the Anti-War Movement” that can be found at this web address: <http://msuweb.montclair.edu/~furg/Vietnam/riseandfall.html>

Some other Marxist groups have written about that period; the International Socialists have a somewhat superficial account in one of their publications.

There are dozens of books written about that period. This piece is not meant to be a scholarly evaluation of all of them, nor even a catalog of them. It is meant more to be a memoir and analysis based on my own limited, but not so limited, experiences. One can find the many books at various booksellers, most notably Amazon.com.

Most of the work on that period is either written from the perspective of liberals and social democrats who decry the militancy of the period or is written by supporters of the Weathermen. Bill Ayers’ book, *Fugitive Days*, is the most famous. Some of these supporters were not contemporaries of the events are just repeating alluring legends that are especially attractive to publishers looking to sell alluring books.

Some of the authors were contemporaries or participants. Many of them gloss over the reality of the damage that was done and instead take the line that the Weathermen were “sincere but overly zealous” – that they supposedly “cared too much but not wisely.” “Overly zealous” is a “quantitative” criticism that hides the elitist, corrupt core of their politics – anti-working class, racist, and egotistical to the extreme of physically destroying the organizational structure of SDS. “Overly zealous” might describe many militants, but this perspective distorts the actual facts of what they were “zealous” about: their own overly inflated arrogance.

Mark Rudd’s website (<http://www.markrudd.com>) and his account, *Underground* (William Morrow, 2009) repeats some of the superficial analysis of the struggle within SDS but at least it has some genuine self-criticism, unlike the combination of self-aggrandizement, vague statements, and outright lies made by Ayers in his work *Fugitive Days*. One can find a spate of other books written by ex-Weathermen, generally taking the “we cared too much” line and leaving out a discussion of the actual damage they did. John Brown was militant and zealous; it is bizarre to put the Weathermen in that category.

Cathy Wilkerson’s critical review of *Fugitive Days* can be found at: <http://www.sds-1960s.org/Wilkerson.htm>. There is some historical work on SDS and the Weathermen, written by contemporaries and participants of that movement that give thoughtful, honest analysis. I might not agree fully with their perspectives, but one can easily see the balanced, thoughtful way they approach this history.

I particularly recommend Katha Pollitt’s insightful piece not merely on the Weathermen, but on how they and others are rewriting history: Katha Pollitt, “Bill Ayers Whitewashes History, Again”, *The Nation*, December 8, 2008, available on line at: <http://www.thenation.com/blog/bill-ayers-whitewashes-history-again>

Jesse Lemisch wrote a thoughtful piece, also as much about the distorted rewriting of history as it is about the Weathermen: Jesse Lemisch, “Weather Underground Rises from the Ashes: They’re Baack!”, in *New Politics* (Summer 2006), available on line at: <http://newpolitics.mayfirst.org/node/204> and here: http://marxsite.com/Against_the_Weathermen.html

Let me finish, again, with a comment and an invitation.

Those who want “peace” in the movement by wanting to silence those who want the truth to be understood and learned are authoritarians posing as supporters of democracy. I, and many others, have no stake in carrying personal grudges. No doubt I might find unity with many with whom I had serious disagreements forty years ago, just as I might disagree with someone today with whom I was very close forty years ago. Someone may be criticized, but they need not be crucified at the age of sixty for honest mistakes made at the age of twenty. But someone at the age of sixty who continues to justify that behavior is subject to scrutiny and criticism, not just for past behavior but also for giving today’s activists distorted perspectives about how to build a movement. This goes double for those who feign the faux-heroism of supposedly “loving not wisely but too well,” making excuses for selfish behavior and even telling outright lies, as Ayers has repeatedly done, in the face of incontrovertible evidence while going on to a life of upper middle class luxury, rubbing elbows with Mayor Daley, Obama, and others who contribute to the oppression of people around the world.

Some folks say that it is not “polite” to bring up past offenses; these are often the same folks who worry about elitism and the ways that anti-capitalist revolutions in the USSR and China succumbed to corruption. But how can we oppose the possibilities of corruption if we do not honestly confront the truth? Some folks say that their nightmare is to spend a lifetime of work and never see “The Revolution” or even a massive revolutionary movement in formation. Others would argue that the bigger nightmare is to complete a “Revolution,” with all the struggle and pain and heroism, and have it be hijacked by an elitist crew. Building a movement that won’t succumb to corruption requires building it on a firm foundation. There is no benefit to the movement in distorting facts.

It is not about grudges. It is about honesty. I spent five years as a full-time organizer for SDS and the movement, and I have basically continued with grassroots organizing since then as a college teacher. This perspective is far from a complete perspective, but it is a perspective that is generally missing from most of the historical accounts made available by mainstream publishers. They generally pose the false choice so well expressed by Jesse Lemisch in his article (cited above) where he discusses a widely seen film:

The 2002 film *The Weather Underground* was made by younger people and seems well intended. But it offers the viewer a Hobson’s Choice between Weather and Todd Gitlin: I didn’t know whether to shit, or go blind! There is in actuality much space for an effective left between these two bizarre poles.

This account certainly isn’t sexy or romantic or exciting as the Hollywood type stories of those who planted bombs at night and smoked dope by day, but one can find the most intense emotional experiences not from the opiates of superficial, stimulating experiences but from having deep, lasting relationships with grassroots people in struggle, understanding that every person is like a planet filled with millions of thoughts, ideas, insights, fear and courage, and one need not look to opiates of various kinds to appreciate the short time we have on Earth. It is not about grudges. It is about exposing the errors and misdeeds and falsehoods as we embrace building a movement that can build a world free from exploitation and oppression.

The invitation is two-fold. First, I invite suggestions, corrections, additions to this account, which is only a part of the book being developed. Secondly, I invite anyone who worked with me during those years to feel free to contact me, and in fact anyone with any questions about the campus anti-war movement and SDS in particular during those years is welcome to contact me.